

AN INSPECTOR CARLYLE NOVELLA

THE HAND OF GOD



JAMES CRAIG

James Craig has worked as a journalist and consultant for more than thirty years. He lives in central London with his family. His previous Inspector Carlyle novels, *London Calling*; *Never Apologise, Never Explain*; *Buckingham Palace Blues*; *The Circus* and *Then We Die* are also available from Constable & Robinson.

For more information visit www.james-craig.co.uk, or follow him on Twitter: [@byjamescraig](https://twitter.com/byjamescraig).

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‘Fast paced and very easy to get quickly lost in.’
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Inspector John Carlyle

Novels

London Calling
Never Apologise, Never Explain
Buckingham Palace Blues
The Circus
Then We Die

Short stories

The Enemy Within
What Dies Inside

AN INSPECTOR CARLYLE
NOVELLA

The Hand of God



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It is only in misery that we recognise the hand of God leading men to good.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Acknowledgements

This is the third short story featuring London policeman John Carlyle. It follows the publication of five full-length Carlyle novels, *London Calling*; *Never Apologise, Never Explain*; *Buckingham Palace Blues*; *The Circus*; and *Then We Die*.

A sixth Inspector Carlyle novel will appear soon.

The Hand of God is set in London in the mid-1980s. It recounts one of Carlyle's early experiences as a young copper and fills in some of the backstory that is touched on in *London Calling*.

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London, 1986

‘Welcome to the shittiest estate in London.’

Carlyle looked at his fellow constable and grunted.

The officer stuck out a meaty paw. ‘You new here?’ he asked, his accent betraying Midlands roots.

‘Nah.’ With some reluctance, Carlyle shook his hand. ‘I’ve been working out of the Borough High Street station for almost a year now. It’s my first time in the Castle Vale, though.’ He looked up nervously, half expecting to see a piece of masonry being dropped on his head from the aerial walkway above.

‘You can relax.’ His colleague grinned. ‘The bad lads won’t be out of bed yet. They don’t come out before dark.’

That’s reassuring, Carlyle thought grimly. Castle Vale had been built on a thirty-acre site south of Elephant and Castle in the 1960s. With almost 2,800 flats, housing 11,000 people, it was, at the time, the biggest housing estate in Europe. In 1972, when the first tenants moved in, it was described as the most ambitious housing scheme in London. Five years later, by the time the final units had been completed, the place was already crumbling. On a visit to the site, the Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer

famously bemoaned how the design ‘actually encouraged people to commit crime’. A geographer from King’s College had listed fifteen ‘design disadvantages’ conducive to antisocial behaviour. Not needing the analysis, postmen, milkmen, taxi drivers and doctors routinely refused to enter the estate. Unable to accept that it should just be torn down, politicians began tinkering at the edges, looking for a quick fix in the manner of a blind squirrel hoping to find a sustaining nut. The government’s Urban Renewal Unit continued to throw money at the problem, installing security features such as video entry phones and better lighting. Despite all the window-dressing, the place still looked very much like its nickname – ‘Hell’s waiting room’.

Tearing his gaze from the pedway, Carlyle looked his newly discovered colleague up and down. Podgy and pasty-faced, he looked to be Carlyle’s age, or maybe a year or so older. He tried to recall seeing the officer previously, but his mind came up blank. ‘I haven’t clocked you before.’

‘I’ve not been around for a while – been on the sick.’

‘Ah.’ Carlyle knew better than to enquire any further. In his experience, police officers were often very fragile creatures; sickness was common and absenteeism rife.

‘I’m Dudley, by the way. Dudley Stockbridge.’

‘John Carlyle.’

‘Very nice to meet you, John,’ Stockbridge said

amiably. ‘Shame it’s just you and me.’

Carlyle grunted his agreement. There was no way that the two of them should have been left deep in enemy territory on their own. However, he knew better than to hope for reinforcements. As usual, the Metropolitan Police was overspent and under-resourced; there was nothing anyone could do about that. Apart from anything else, the bitter News International dispute, across the river at Wapping, was soaking up hundreds of thousands of police man hours and blowing already fragile budgets to smithereens. Over recent months, Carlyle had spent his fair share of Saturday nights in the company of 6,000 angry newspaper workers as they tried to stop the procession of lorries leaving Rupert Murdoch’s grim bunker with the next morning’s newspapers. Having already experienced what had happened to the miners, Carlyle had no doubt as to the ultimate outcome. The march of new technology, backed by the iron fist of the state, would prove invincible. The days of hot metal and Fleet Street were gone, never to return. Now it was just a question of how long it would be until the print unions’ protest collapsed.

‘Where were you before Southwark?’ enquired Stockbridge.

‘I moved from Shepherd’s Bush,’ Carlyle mumbled, not really interested in making conversation with his fellow plod. ‘Just over a year ago.’

‘Any good?’

‘Yeah. Not bad.’ Despite what Dudley had said, Carlyle found his gaze drifting upwards as he kept a wary eye out for incoming missiles. In his relatively short police career, he had already felt what it was like to take a half-brick to the back of the head, and he had no desire to repeat the experience. Standing in a narrow courtyard, they were vulnerable to attack from all sides. Many of the Castle’s residents took a perverse pride in living on the most violent estate in London’s most violent borough. Always a tinderbox, the place had exploded two days earlier when an attempted arrest had gone badly wrong. A woman had been shot by officers looking for her two sons in connection with the robbery of a sub-post office. As news of the shooting spread, residents armed with rubble, bin lids, hammers and knives had fought with police for more than six hours. Fighting had continued the following night, with rioters adding petrol bombs and baseball bats to their armoury. Shots had been fired from an unidentified weapon. A dozen cars had been torched and the local office looted. A TV cameraman had been killed instantly when he was hit on the head with a breezeblock, less than twenty feet from where Carlyle now stood. Another forty-six people had been treated for a range of injuries and there had been more than two hundred arrests. The woman, Carole Lovelock, was in a critical but stable condition in Guy’s Hospital; according to the newspapers, she had been left paralysed from the waist down. The sons

were still at large.

In the last twenty-four hours, a tense calm had descended on the Castle. For fear of sparking off more violence – and running up additional overtime costs – the police presence had been quickly wound down. Stockbridge and Carlyle had been placed outside number 32 Goscote Way, Mrs Lovelock's maisonette, to keep looters at bay and also on the off chance that Gareth and Roger Lovelock might reappear.

The upsurge in civil unrest was not totally unconnected to the weather. After an interminable delay, summer had finally arrived in the city with a bang. Temperatures had jumped above thirty degrees, with the promise of more to come. Even in the shade, the atmosphere was stifling. Yawning, Carlyle watched a skinny dog wander through the courtyard. The mutt, some kind of mongrel, eyed the policemen blankly as it cocked its leg on a pile of rubbish, finishing its business before casually wandering off and disappearing into the shadows.

Pulling a white handkerchief from his pocket, Stockbridge huffed and puffed as he mopped his brow, looking every inch like a character from an Ealing comedy. Placing the hanky back in his trousers, he jerked a tired thumb towards the door behind them. 'How long do you think they're gonna keep us standing around here?'

'Dunno.' Carlyle tried to raise some spit, but his mouth was too dry.

‘I mean,’ Stockbridge continued, ‘it’s not as if the Lovelock boys would be stupid enough to come back, is it?’

‘Dunno.’ Carlyle shrugged. As a cop, he had quickly come to realise that the sheer stupidity of your average criminal was never to be underestimated.

‘Not when they know that we’re after them.’

‘Stranger things have happened.’ Out of the corner of his eye, Carlyle saw a figure appear from his right. Head down, face hidden behind the brim of a Millwall baseball cap, the man slouched towards them, only looking up when he was barely fifteen feet from the front door of number 32.

Oh fuck . . .

Stockbridge tensed. ‘Which one is it?’ he asked, as the boy turned on his heel and began legging it back whence he had come.

How the fuck should I know? Carlyle thought. *They’re supposed to be identical fucking twins.* ‘Does it matter?’ he hissed, as he sprang forward. ‘Call it in.’ Leaving Stockbridge fumbling with his radio, he gave chase.

Arms pumping, he sprinted across the courtyard, ignoring the burning sensation that had blossomed almost immediately in his chest. The chatter from Stockbridge’s radio faded to nothing as he rounded a corner and found himself at the foot of a gentle ramp leading to the walkway above. Although never much of an athlete, an adrenalin-

fuelled Carlyle was gratified to notice that he was moving faster than his quarry. It was clear that the youth was already struggling with the exertion of the chase. *That's the problem with kids today*, he thought cheerily, *they just don't do enough bloody exercise*. Calculating the narrowing gap to now be less than ten yards, he upped his pace. 'C'mere, you bastard!' he shouted, affecting his best Jack Regan impersonation. 'You're fucking nicked.'

Grunting with the effort, Carlyle planted his right foot firmly down. As he pushed forward, he felt it slide away from underneath him. *Argh!* Unable to correct his balance, he careered head first into a concrete wall and landed in a dazed heap on the ramp.

For a moment there was silence, followed by the sound of a dry cackle from somewhere above his head. Then came a hawking noise, and what felt like a fat raindrop landed on his head, accompanied by the mocking cry, 'Ha! Fuck you, copper.'

At least it wasn't a brick, Carlyle thought, as he used the sleeve of his uniform to wipe the phlegm from his hair. Satisfied that he'd done the best he could, he lay back and contemplated the small patch of blue sky visible above the walkway as he took stock of his injuries. There was a gash on his forehead, near the hairline, and his right arm ached, but it wasn't serious. He would have a few bruises but nothing seemed to be broken. Shuffling himself into a sitting position, he saw Stockbridge appear at the foot of

the ramp.

‘What happened?’

Carlyle tilted his chin in the direction of the freshly minted dog shit that was now smeared all over the concrete. ‘I went arse over tit, didn’t I?’

Stockbridge began to grin but quickly thought better of it. From the direction of the Old Kent Road came the sound of police sirens, getting closer at a rate of knots. ‘Backup’s on the way.’

A bit fucking late for that, Carlyle grouched. Holding up a hand, he levered himself an inch off the floor. ‘Help me up,’ he commanded wearily. ‘We’d better go and tell them what’s happened, I suppose.’

Dressed for the occasion, in a tweed jacket, checked shirt, brown cords and a pair of the most sensible brogues, Martin Palmer stepped off the 11.18 from Paddington and breathed in deeply, enjoying the warm countryside air. It was a lovely day to be out of the office. And out of the city. Loosening his tie, he allowed himself a moment to take in his surroundings. ‘What a fine spot,’ he murmured, watching the handful of his fellow passengers who had similarly disembarked make their way out of the station before letting his gaze drift upwards, to take in the spire of St Mary’s parish church. ‘What a fine spot indeed.’

With the platform emptied, he sauntered slowly towards the station exit, careful to let his fellow travellers disperse before stepping through the ticket office and heading outside. Ignoring the hopeful waiting taxi driver, Palmer took a left down what passed for the main road, heading into the village proper. Keeping to his leisurely pace, he made his way past a primary school, a post office, a butcher’s and a corner shop. Apart from a bright red Mini that roared past, its aged driver squinting through the screen in search of oncoming traffic, he did not encounter another soul. It was the middle of a working day and the streets were deserted.

A hundred yards or so further on, the road forked in two. The visitor paused to get his bearings under the branches of a massive oak tree. It was fiercely hot, even in the shade. He wiped a bead of sweat from his brow with the back of his hand as he wondered about the wisdom of his choice of such a heavy jacket. Standards of dress, however, were important. After giving the matter some careful thought, he resisted the temptation to take off the garment and slip it over his arm. From the far distance came a low, insistent rumble, and he imagined that it might be the gentle roar of artillery on Salisbury Plain. Military manoeuvres. *A bit like what I'm on.* Laughing at his own joke, he considered the road once again. Deciding to take the right fork, he began humming the opening lines of 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary' as he resumed his journey.

After walking for another minute or so, he came to a rusting signpost sticking drunkenly out of the grass verge at a forty-five-degree angle. Its black and white paint had peeled off in large patches and it pointed off in the direction of a dusty field on the other side of the road. 'Bingo!' Palmer smiled; for once, it looked like he had chosen the right option. He assumed that Birinus Way had been named after the saint who had reputedly converted the locals to Christianity back in the seventh century; it was one of the few facts that an expensive public school education had managed to plant in his brain. Presumably it was the narrow lane that led off to the side of the field,

rather than the field itself. Glancing over his shoulder to check on the non-existent traffic, he jogged over to its entrance, quickly disappearing behind a large hedge.

Somewhat incongruously, a row of six two-storey redbrick houses had been built in a shallow hollow about three hundred yards from the main road, looking out across a field containing a small copse of poplar trees. As he approached, Palmer scanned the buildings. Each property appeared well looked after, with small, tidy gardens both back and front, consisting of neatly mowed lawns surrounded by modest flower beds backing up to a low stone wall. Further back stood a line of small garages, each with the same red-painted door. All were shut and padlocked. Next to the nearest garage was a wooden stile giving access to the field beyond.

A line of washing hung limply in front of the closest house; otherwise there was no sign of life. 'Good,' mumbled Palmer, patting the reassuring weight in his jacket pocket. 'That's perfect.'

The house he was visiting was the last in the row. Stepping through the open gate, Palmer walked casually up the path and went round the side of the house, heading towards a small garden shed that stood at the bottom of the back garden. As he approached, he noticed a small wooden sign hanging from the door handle by a piece of wire. The writing was small and he had to bend down and squint to see what it said.

Gone fishing.

‘Excuse me? Can I help you?’

Straightening himself up, Palmer turned to face a stern-looking woman, about his own height, with high cheekbones and lively blue eyes under a bob of white hair. She was wearing a floral-print dress, its short sleeves showing off her tanned arms to good effect. In her right hand she carried a wicker basket containing a selection of groceries. Sticking out of the top he noticed a packet of Penguin biscuits and licked his lips.

‘Can I help you?’ she repeated, making it sound more like a threat than a question. Placing her basket on the grass, she widened her stance by an inch or two, as if she were getting ready for a fight.

‘I was looking for Mr Woolfall.’ Palmer smiled sweetly, casually dropping the name of one of the neighbours into the conversation. On first inspection, the woman looked to be in her late sixties, maybe even early seventies. *A handsome old girl*, he thought, *and just my cup of tea, too.* An idea popped into his head, causing a frisson of excitement to ripple through his chest, heading towards his loins. *Maybe I’ll drop in on her on my way home.*

Tilting her head, the woman gestured back in the direction from which he’d come. ‘Wrong house,’ she said. ‘He lives at number three.’

Palmer started back down the path. ‘Ah, my mistake,’

he said, trying to grovel just a little bit. ‘Apologies for the intrusion, Mrs . . .’

‘Scanlon.’

That’s right. Marjorie Scanlon. Game old bird. Debutante of the year in 1930-something. A stalwart of the London social scene until she was caught shagging some judge and was cast out into the Home Counties wilderness.

Everything was falling nicely into place. Palmer gave himself a mental pat on the back. At this rate, he’d be home in time for tea with the minimum of fuss.

‘It’s a strange time to be making a call. Mr Woolfall should be at work.’ The woman looked at him suspiciously. ‘I was just speaking to his wife at the shops,’ she added, as if this was somehow proof of her thesis. ‘She was just off to the butcher’s to get a nice bit of brisket for his tea.’

‘Yes, normally that would be correct. Now, however, things have taken a most unfortunate turn for poor Mr Woolfall.’

‘They have?’

‘Yes.’ Pausing at Mrs Scanlon’s shoulder, Palmer lowered his voice. ‘Let’s just say that brisket might be off the menu for a while at number three, I’m afraid.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Don’t say I mentioned it,’ he whispered, throwing a furtive glance towards the lace curtains that hung in the

window of number three, 'but he was sacked last week.'

'No!' The mock horror in the woman's voice betrayed her hunger for more gossip.

Did the curtains twitch? Or did he imagine it? Turning his gaze back to Marjorie Scanlon, Palmer arched his eyebrows. 'You can't tell anyone about this.'

'No, of course not.' Now it was the woman's turn to lick her lips. Her posture relaxed as she folded her arms, preparing to receive some juicy gossip.

Palmer thought about Alfred Woolfall sitting at his desk at Devonish & Co. in the City, daydreaming about his brisket supper, blissfully unaware of this completely slanderous conversation taking place outside his front door, and wondered if he should be hamming it up quite so much. Unable to resist, he continued with his improvised tale. 'Well, some irregularities were discovered, you see, and certain sums appear to be unaccounted for. So far, at least.'

'Yes,' said Mrs Scanlon, a little too eagerly.

Taking a half-step backwards, he held up a hand. 'I really shouldn't say any more. And not a word to poor Mrs Woolfall.'

'No, no. Of course not.' Letting her arms fall to her sides, Marjorie Scanlon shook her head vigorously, as she ran through a mental list of all the people whom she *would* be telling as soon as she'd squeezed the juicy details out of the strange chap standing in front of her.

‘In a situation like this, when a husband has fallen off the straight and narrow, the least he can do is make sure that his wife hears it from him first, surely?’

‘Yes, of course.’ *Get on with it.* Mrs Scanlon hopped from foot to foot, like a six-year-old in need of the bathroom.

‘Anyway,’ Palmer continued, amazed at the rubbish he seemed able to spout at will, ‘I’m not really the chap who has to worry too much about precisely what has happened up to this point. Nor, indeed, about what the proper explanation for the events leading up to the matter in question might, in fact, be. Rather, my job is more to help determine and shape what happens next.’

‘I see,’ said Mrs Scanlon, obviously not having a clue what he was talking about.

‘Yes . . .’ Like an actor momentarily forgetting his lines, Palmer scratched his head and took a moment to watch a crow sitting on a nearby telephone pole while he tried to work out where he was going with this. ‘I’ve been sent here by the company, you see, to do a psychological assessment on Mr Woolfall in the wake of these . . . issues coming to light. By all accounts he’s a good chap really. And the bank will get its money back, so it’s best all round if he’s just quietly moved on to another employer.’

‘But . . .’ Mrs Scanlon frowned as she glanced back at number three, home, she now realised, to a plethora of sins, ‘he stole your money!’

Palmer shook his head ruefully. ‘You’d be amazed how common this kind of thing is. That’s the sad thing about banking these days: it’s simply not the safe, respectable profession it used to be. A get-rich-quick mentality has infected every corner of our society, corroding its very fabric. On the other hand, if we threw every light-fingered banker into jail, there would be none left. London’s role as a financial centre would be fatally undermined. The business would go to the French and the Germans. And what would that do for our balance of payments?’ Watching her hanging on his every word, he pulled from his memory a recent conversation he’d heard in the office canteen. ‘As you know, all the traditional industries in this country have either collapsed or are on the brink of collapse. Banking is about all we have left and, God knows, the socialists have done what they can to try and kill that off too. Like it or not, the bankers pay the bills. If we don’t let the City of London . . . well, get on with things, we’ll end up broke, like some banana republic.’

Mrs Scanlon harrumphed, as if to signify just how insignificant the balance of payments was compared to the fall of her neighbour.

Palmer made a face, as if to say, *I don’t disagree with you, madam, but that’s just the way of the world.* ‘I’m a small cog in a big machine, Mrs Scanlon. What I do is part of the outplacement service that Devonish and Co. offers staff they have to let go, under whatever circumstances.

The company needs to make sure they're in a fit state to try and find a new job, so that they can get them off their books as quickly as possible.'

'But I thought Alfred was doing so well at the bank. His wife told me only the other day that he was expecting a promotion.'

Palmer stared apologetically at his shoes. 'Sadly, the spouse is often the last to know.'

'Yes,' said Marjorie Scanlon with feeling. 'The poor woman, she's going to get a terrible shock.'

'I fear that may be correct.' Palmer glanced down the lane. The last thing he wanted now was to see Hugh Scanlon returning home for his lunch. Happily, of the fisherman there was no sign.

'And they've booked a holiday,' Marjorie continued. 'Two weeks in Florida next month. It wouldn't be what I'd choose, of course, but it was very expensive. And now that the bank has dumped him, how will they be able to afford it?' There was more than a touch of glee detectable in her voice. 'The silly bugger really has made a mess of things, hasn't he?'

The conversation had gone on for more than long enough. Edging towards the gate, Palmer observed, 'It's just the world we live in, I'm afraid.'

'I suppose so.' Picking up her basket, Mrs Scanlon retrieved a set of keys and headed towards her back door. 'Well, nice to meet you, Mr . . .'

‘Er . . .’ For a moment, he was stumped. Recovering his composure, he doffed an imaginary cap. ‘Bullivant,’ he smiled. ‘Henry Bullivant.’

‘Nice to meet you, Mr Bullivant.’

‘You too, Mrs Scanlon. But remember’ – he gave her a theatrical wink – ‘not a word to anyone about this.’

Waiting until the woman had disappeared indoors, he quickly retraced his steps. Rounding the far end of the terrace, he ran past the row of garages and clambered over the stile into the field at the back. Checking that he could not be seen from the houses, he surveyed the scene. A footpath was clearly visible leading down into a wooded hollow. Beyond the trees he could just catch a glimpse of the Kennet and Avon Canal. Twenty yards away, a solitary cow stood in the middle of the field. It eyed him with a bored expression as it deposited a large pat on to the grass before wandering off down the hill.

A pleasant breeze had sprung up, taking the edge off the sun’s rays, making it an almost perfect day in an almost perfect country. *A green and pleasant land indeed!* Embraced by a sense of immense well-being, Palmer had to resist a strong temptation to sit down for a little nap. Yawning widely, his mind returned to the packet of Penguin biscuits winking at him from Marjorie Scanlon’s basket. He glanced at his watch. It was past lunchtime and he felt his stomach rumble. ‘Patience, patience,’ he mumbled to himself. There would be time enough to enjoy

the woman's hospitality later in the day. For now, it was time to go fishing.

By the time he reached the canal footpath, the sky had clouded over somewhat and the intense midday heat had been replaced by something more humid and indistinct. Pausing to wipe his brow, he gazed into the brown water and felt a slight shiver of disgust. As a child, he had never taken to things aquatic. His mother's half-hearted attempt to get him to learn to swim had never proceeded beyond two unpleasant forty-minute lessons at Battersea baths. The experience of the instructor – a permanently angry woman with an appalling crew cut, built like a shot-putter – smacking him round the head as she shouted at the flailing youngster to ‘Kick those fat legs, boy, kick!’ had put him off for life. In the face of young Martin's refusal to return for a third lesson, his mother's resistance had crumbled. Since that day, the only water he was prepared to countenance was in a carefully drawn bath.

How deep is it in there? Stepping towards the edge of the towpath, he cautiously dangled the toe of a brogue an inch out over the water before quickly returning it to terra firma none the wiser. Overhead, somewhere above the clouds, there was the faintest of mechanical whines, presumably an aircraft heading for Heathrow. Released from his reverie, Palmer looked right, along the canal. On

the far side, about a hundred yards from where he was standing, a woman was walking a couple of dogs. Happily, they were heading away from him, towards the village. He turned to his left; in the middle distance he could just make out a solitary fishing rod poking out from under the shade of a tree. Otherwise, there was no one else to be seen. Resuming his tuneless version of 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary', he continued his stroll.

He found Hugh Scanlon sitting on a small metal-framed folding chair of the kind people might take to Brighton beach on a bank holiday. The old fellow looked to be in good nick for his age, which Palmer knew to be eighty-one, indeed, almost eighty-two. At first glance, however, Scanlon appeared to be rather overdressed for a relaxed summer day by the side of the canal. He was resplendent in a pair of green cords, rather worn at the knees, and a white cotton shirt, buttoned at the neck, his yellow silk tie emblazoned with a succession of small mallard ducks. On his head was a grey flat cap of the kind Palmer's grandfather used to wear and on his feet a pair of sturdy-looking tan walking boots. Over the back of the chair hung a brown jacket, a pipe sticking out of the breast pocket. On the ground by Scanlon's feet was a large rectangular bait box, a small green knapsack and a tartan thermos. In one hand the fisherman held the plastic cup from the top of the flask and in the other a copy of that morning's *Daily*

Express, complete with the seemingly obligatory photograph of Princess Diana on the front page. His rod, supported on a small tripod, extended eight feet from the bank before a thin nylon wire disappeared into the water. Scanlon paid it no heed; the rod seemed to be doing the fishing all on its own.

How very civilised, Palmer thought. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his Browning and let it hang by his side as casually as he could manage. The Hi-Power felt heavy in his hand and he wondered if he would ever get used to it. The weapon was supposed to demonstrate the seriousness of his intent, but, if anything, it made him feel like a fraud. It was a reminder of past failures; a replacement for one that he had lost on a previous mission, and he gripped it tightly. To lose one weapon was a misfortune; to lose a second would be marked down as severe carelessness. Worse than that, the powers-that-be would dock his pay.

Scanlon looked up as the younger man approached, squinting against the glare. He watched Palmer come to a stop five feet from his chair.

‘Mr Scanlon?’

With a tilt of his head, Scanlon gestured over his shoulder. ‘No son, he’s about half a mile further down, on the other side. That’s where he thinks the best fishing is, this time of year.’

Palmer frowned as he lifted his gaze to the middle

distance. As far as he could make out, there was no one there.

‘Only joking, lad,’ Scanlon chuckled.

Palmer felt his frown deepen. He had a good mind to shoot the cheeky old buzzard on the spot. ‘Sorry, but—’

Scanlon cut him off with a wave of his newspaper. ‘Sorry. Not much of a joke.’

‘No.’

‘That’s always been a problem.’

‘What?’

‘My so-called sense of humour. Never knew when to keep my mouth shut.’

That’s true enough. ‘I see.’

Scanlon took a quick gulp from the cup and Palmer noticed that his hand was shaking. ‘It’s funny what other people find funny. Or, rather, don’t.’

‘I suppose it is,’ Palmer replied, never having given the matter any thought.

‘Anyway,’ Scanlon continued, injecting as much cheer into his voice as he could muster, ‘I was wondering when you’d turn up.’ Making no reference to the gun, he held up his cup and offered it to his guest. ‘Fancy a nip before we get started?’

Palmer looked at the cup suspiciously. ‘What is it?’

‘Bell’s,’ replied Scanlon. ‘Not the best, but not bad for a day like today.’

That would explain it, Palmer thought. *You’re sloshed.*

He looked at his watch and saw that it was past lunchtime, too. How many days like this had the old chap sat here getting pickled, waiting for Palmer – or someone like him – to arrive? What a sorry carry-on. At least the poor sod wouldn't have to wait any longer.

An idea floated casually into his head. He glanced back down the canal. The woman with the dogs had disappeared and there was no one else in sight. They had the place completely to themselves. He gestured towards the thermos with the semi-automatic. 'How much have you had?'

'Not so much,' the old fellow replied amiably.

'Drink up then,' Palmer commanded, slipping the gun back into his pocket. 'Then we can get this over with.'

'You're the boss – cheers!' Scanlon held up the cup in a mock toast, before downing its contents in a single gulp. Tossing the *Express* on to the ground, he reached down for the thermos, unscrewed the top and refilled the cup to the brim, splashing some excess whisky on to his trousers. Placing the flask carefully on the ground, he returned his gaze to Palmer. 'Just one thing, old chap.'

'Yes?'

'Marjorie. The lovely Mrs Scanlon.' He gazed down into his Scotch. 'The third Mrs Scanlon, actually, but by far the best of the bunch. I should have married her straight off the bat in '34 when I had the chance. No doubt it would have saved a lot of anguish over the years. But hey ho, we

all make mistakes, eh? *C'est la vie.*' Taking another mouthful of whisky, he looked at Palmer for some confirmation of this universal truth. Finding none, he continued: 'Anyway, none of this has anything whatsoever to do with her. Marjorie has never been involved in my professional life in any way, shape or form. So I hope that you're not going to drag her into this.'

'Of course not,' Palmer said sharply. Looking away from his victim, he gazed into the canal. All of a sudden there was a ripple on the surface of the water and something began pulling on the line. Ignoring the fish, he turned his attention back to Scanlon, who, despite the heat, was making an exceedingly good stab at polishing off the Bell's in record time. 'Don't worry,' he said, trying his best to sound reassuring, 'nothing is going to happen to your wife. We play fair, you know.'

'Yes, yes,' Scanlon muttered, 'I know you do. I just wanted to have some clarification on that particular point.'

'That's settled then.' Palmer smiled. 'Now, drink up before we get started.'

Sitting at the kitchen table, Helen Kennedy pushed a strand of hair behind her ear as she inspected the various cuts and bruises that littered his face. ‘Does it hurt?’ Her expression was a perfect mixture of compassion and annoyance.

‘Nah, I’m fine,’ Carlyle replied, happy to play the brave soldier if it would win him some cheap sympathy. ‘They sent me to A and E for a check-up, but nothing’s broken.’ He grinned at her lecherously. ‘They gave me the day off, though, to recover.’

‘What happened?’ Helen asked, leaning back in her chair, all the better to get away from his raging hormones.

Before he could say a word, his mother hijacked the conversation. ‘The silly sod was chasing after some criminal,’ she snapped, ‘and he slipped on some dog’s mess.’

‘You tripped up?’ Helen bit her lower lip in an attempt not to laugh.

Gripping his Fulham FC mug tightly, Carlyle glared at his mother, even though she had her back turned to him. ‘I thought you were off to the shops, Ma.’

‘Yes, yes.’ Rummaging under the sink, she came up with a couple of Tesco plastic bags. ‘Is there anything you

fancy for your tea?’ Then, more hopefully, ‘Will you be staying for something to eat, Helen love?’

‘That’s all right, Lorna,’ Helen said brightly. ‘We’re going out tonight.’

Lorna? A frisson of dismay spread through Carlyle’s brain. Since when was his girlfriend on first-name terms with his mother? He had been going out with Helen Kennedy for more than six months now, but this was only the fifth or sixth time that she had visited the flat that – much to his chagrin – he still shared with his parents. And only the second time his parents – to his even greater chagrin – had actually been present.

Even without the intervention of his parents, Carlyle was amazed that Helen hadn’t yet dumped him. He still shivered at the thought of how he had first met her, ducking into Westminster Reference Library to avoid the rain on a grim winter’s day and finding her almost totally hidden behind a large pile of books about nineteenth-century European history. How he had plucked up the courage to go over and talk to her was a mystery, both then and now, as was how he had managed to get her to agree to a date. Even now, he veered between insane glee at his good fortune and mortal terror that it could run out at any minute.

His mother looked at him slyly. ‘I thought you were going to watch the football with your dad? You know how he likes watching the World Cup.’

‘Not tonight,’ Carlyle said firmly.

‘Isn’t it Scotland tonight?’ his mother asked, demonstrating a level of awareness of the sport that had never been previously revealed. ‘They’re playing . . .’ she tried to dredge up a name from the depths of her brain, ‘someone or other.’

Yeah, and they’re crap. After the complete and utter fiasco of the 1978 competition, a most abject failure even by Scottish standards, Carlyle had vowed never again to worry too much about what the eleven comedians in blue shirts got up to on a football pitch. Apart from anything else, he was only a second-generation Scot, which made him even worse than an Anglo! It wasn’t like his father was a raging fan either. Alexander Carlyle knew as well as his son that disaster would sink the current campaign sooner or later, and almost certainly sooner. It was as if football existed simply to replenish the well of deep, dark pessimism that characterised the Carlyle menfolk. When it was a choice between that and a night out with Helen, there was simply no contest. ‘There’ll be plenty of other games,’ he replied, trying to sound as reasonable as possible.

A pained expression settled on his mother’s face. ‘He’ll be really disappointed.’

Not that you give a toss.

‘We’re going to see a film,’ Helen explained, trying to move the conversation on. ‘*Betty Blue.*’

‘*Betty Blue,*’ his mother repeated, making it sound about as appealing as a dose of castor oil.

‘It’s French.’

Carlyle watched his mother consider a range of possible responses before limiting herself to ‘That’s nice’, delivered with the grumpy air of a woman who had long since forgotten what it was like to go on a date.

‘I’m really looking forward to it,’ Helen beamed. ‘And we’ll probably go somewhere to get a bite to eat afterwards.’ She shot a glance at Carlyle, who ignored the coming pain in his wallet long enough to nod his assent.

‘He’s taking you somewhere nice, I hope,’ his mother said grimly.

‘*I’m* taking him, actually.’ Helen grinned. ‘We’re celebrating.’

‘Oh?’ Carlyle watched as his mother’s brain ran through a list of stock possibilities, all of which would be guaranteed to cause her further annoyance. She shot him a look that said, *Something else you haven’t told me?* ‘That sounds nice.’

‘Yes,’ Helen continued. ‘I’ve got a job.’

‘Ah.’ His mother’s shoulders relaxed as she stood down from red alert. ‘But I thought you hadn’t got your exam results yet?’ Helen had recently completed her finals at the LSE, where she had been studying international relations. To Carlyle’s mind, it was hard to come up with a degree less likely to equip you for the world of work,

but Helen had surprised him by landing a job as an administration assistant in the London office of an American aid charity less than a week after the end of the summer term.

‘That doesn’t matter. I know I’m going to get a decent degree and I really need to start work sooner rather than later. It doesn’t pay a lot but it’ll be useful experience.’

‘Yes.’ A look of dismay passed across his mother’s face. ‘I often think that John should have gone to university. It might have helped him get a *proper* job.’

‘Mm.’ Helen stared into her tea.

‘Yeah,’ Carlyle scoffed. ‘Like a couple of O levels and a cycling proficiency test were ever going to get me very far.’

‘You could have done better in your civil service exam,’ his mother scolded.

Helen gave him a smile to offset his mother’s grumpiness. ‘You never mentioned that you’d tried for the civil service.’

‘Me and ten thousand Oxbridge clones,’ Carlyle harrumphed. ‘All of whom had been prepped for the bloody thing. I just turned up and sat the paper. Never had a clue.’ He glanced at his mother. ‘Not that I ever wanted to join the bloody Foreign Office anyway.’

‘You could have tried harder,’ his mother said, clasping the plastic bags to her bosom as she slipped into a familiar lament.

Helen decided to intervene. ‘But I think John’s done very well, Lorna,’ she said brightly. ‘He’s got a good job. And an extremely important one.’ Rising from her chair, she leant across the table and gave him a peck on the lips before sitting back down.

Carlyle blushed, embarrassed by her show of kindness and impressed by her willingness to stand up to his mother. As a *Guardian*-reading leftie, Helen was no fan of the police, but when it came to her boyfriend at least, she had always judged the man and not the job.

‘He could have done better,’ his mother grumbled. ‘That’s all I’m saying.’

‘For God’s sake, Ma!’ He gestured towards the door. ‘You’ve always got to have the last word, haven’t you? I thought you were going out.’

‘Aye, well, I won’t be long.’ Heading past the table, she gave Helen a consoling pat on the arm. ‘Nice to see you again, dear. Maybe you can come round for tea one night. John’s dad would like that.’

‘That would be lovely, Lorna.’ Helen smiled, taking a sip of her tea.

‘Good. I’ll leave it to John to sort out a date.’ With considerable reluctance, she slipped into the hall. ‘Behave yourselves while I’m out.’

For a minute or so, they sat in silence, listening to his mother getting herself ready for her trip to the shops. After the front door finally closed behind her, Carlyle counted to

twenty to make sure that she had finally gone. Rising from the table, he dropped his mug into the sink and turned to face Helen.

‘Sorry about that.’

‘Don’t worry about it.’ Pushing back her chair, she got up and stepped towards him. ‘It’s the same for everyone. My parents are worse.’

‘I suppose.’ Having never met Helen’s parents, he was prepared to give them the benefit of the doubt.

Putting her arms round his neck, she kissed him tenderly on the lips. ‘Your mother just wants the best for you.’

‘God knows what my mother wants.’ Pulling Helen close, he breathed in her scent as he kissed the top of her head.

‘Hey!’ She made a half-hearted attempt to squirm from his embrace.

‘C’mon,’ he grinned, gesturing in the general direction of his bedroom. ‘Let’s go and listen to some Pet Shop Boys and I can show you the rest of my injuries.’

Inspector Walter Callender scratched his head and looked blankly at his colleague. Sergeant Joseph Young absorbed the stare, giving nothing in return. An amiable fellow, if as dumb as a box of rocks, Young was well suited to the limited vagaries of day-to-day life as a provincial copper, which meant that he wouldn't be much use at this particular crime scene.

‘Well, boss?’ he asked finally.

‘Well,’ Callender sighed. ‘You’d better let Mrs Callender know that there’s no chance of me being home in time for dinner this evening.’

‘Yes, boss.’ If Young felt slighted at being given such a menial task, he didn’t let it show.

‘Get back to the station and help coordinate our initial lines of inquiry. Let me know who’s on shift for the next twenty-four hours and we can decide if we need more resources, which we will.’ Callender fully expected CID to relieve him of the case before the day was out – this kind of carry-on being meat and drink to the energetic boys at the Criminal Investigation Department – but this would give Young something to do in the meantime.

‘Yes, boss.’ Resisting the temptation to salute, Young recovered his helmet from the top of Marjorie Scanlon’s

Aga and turned on his heel, almost tripping over a tabby cat loitering by the door as he headed out. With a hiss of disapproval, the cat skulked over to an empty bowl on the floor by the oven. Shaking his head, Callender looked at the animal.

‘Hold on a second, Tiddles.’ Reaching down, he retrieved the bowl, the cat watching him patiently as he filled it with water from the tap at the sink before carefully returning it to the tiles. He watched as the cat took a succession of sips before sitting up and looking up at him expectantly.

‘I suppose you want something to eat, too?’ Callender stepped over to the fridge and opened the door, pulling out an opened can of John West tuna and dumping the contents into a bowl on the draining board by the sink. ‘Here you go.’ Placing the fish next to the water, he watched the cat happily dig in. A telephone started ringing in the living room next door. Callender counted thirteen rings before it stopped.

‘What are you doing?’

Looking up, Callender saw the familiar figure of county pathologist Frank Scudder standing in the doorway. A portly fellow, he was red in the face, clearly struggling with the heat of the day.

‘Just feeding the cat.’

Dropping his bag on the tiled floor, Scudder pushed his thick-rimmed NHS-style specs up a nose that was

marginally too big for his face and gestured towards the body hanging from the light fitting in the centre of the room. 'Haven't you got more important things to do?'

'I was just waiting for you, Frank.' Leaning against the sink, Callender folded his arms. 'And it's not like Mrs Scanlon's going anywhere, is it?'

Scudder tilted his head, as if trying to make eye contact with the deceased. 'Terrible business.'

'That's for sure. Have they fished the husband out of the canal yet?'

'They were doing that when I left,' Scudder explained. 'I thought I'd better get up here straight away.'

'Makes sense,' Callender agreed.

'We don't really have the manpower to deal with two crime scenes at once. Then again, we don't normally get this kind of thing in Berkshire.' He shot Callender a look. 'It's not the big bad city, after all.'

'We didn't normally get this kind of thing in Mile End either,' the inspector observed, without rancour. He was used to being pigeonholed as the big city cop; the Met policeman in exile. It came with the territory. He and his wife had left London eighteen months previously. After the best part of twenty years of putting up with her husband working the mean streets of the East End, Carole Callender pined for the quiet life. The inspector just wanted *a* quiet life. Although perhaps not as quiet as the one he had had up until 4 p.m. this afternoon. Unpleasant

though they were, these deaths were the first interesting thing Callender had come across since he had walked through the front doors of Newbury police station to start the long, slow, *boring* descent into retirement.

Be careful what you wish for, he admonished himself as he watched Scudder's glasses resume their southward migration down his nose.

'No, I suppose not.' Scudder straightened himself up and retrieved his bag. 'And the nearest thing we had to a local celebrity, too.'

'Who? Mrs Scanlon?'

'No, the husband. Hugh Scanlon. He was a famous journalist.'

Callender thought about it for a moment. 'The name doesn't ring any bells.'

'This would be in the sixties. He was retired now, or largely retired. He still produced the odd book, I think. Spies were his thing. The Cold War. Reds under the bed, and all that.'

'Like John le Carré?' Callender asked.

'No, no. Like I said, he was a journalist. He was an expert on traitors in the security services, people like . . . whodyamacallit . . . Philby and Maclean.'

'Maybe a spy killed him,' Callender quipped, already bored with the conversation.

'I don't know about that. It looks like the old fella had been drinking heavily. We found a thermos flask with

whisky in it by the side of the canal. Looks like he'd drunk most of it.'

Callender frowned. 'So he could have just fallen in and drowned?'

'I would have said that was most likely.' Scudder readjusted his specs again, gesturing at Marjorie Scanlon with his chin as he did so. 'If it wasn't for her.'

'Mm.'

'Unless he had an accident and she found him, then ran home and topped herself out of grief.'

'It doesn't seem very likely,' Callender mused.

Scudder stared at the woman, as if he was expecting her to offer up an explanation of what had happened. 'You don't think,' he said finally, '. . . we couldn't be talking about *foul play*, could we?'

'That, Frank,' Callender smiled, 'is what I am looking for you to enlighten me on.'

Sitting in the otherwise empty first-class compartment of the 4.47 to Paddington, Martin Palmer rested his head against the cool glass of the window as he contemplated another productive day. After attending to the Scanlons, he had enjoyed a most agreeable pork pie, washed down by a pint of Berkshire Traditional Pale Ale, in a pub called the Red Lion overlooking the village green. It was a modest repast but enough to keep him going until he got home and his mother placed his dinner before him.

After ambling back to the train station, he had been dismayed to discover that there would be a wait of more than an hour for the next train back into town. However, a nice bench in the sun allowed him the chance of a postprandial snooze, and the wait was not so burdensome, even with an additional twenty-five-minute delay caused by signal problems at Swindon. Now, as the train pulled out of the station, he was surprised to see an ambulance making its way along the lane, its lights flashing and siren sounding. Palmer knew where it was heading. *That was quick*, he reflected. *Who'd have thought they'd have found the old buggers already?* The vague sense of annoyance permeating his brain quickly dissipated as he sat back in his seat. *Not that it matters*. Perhaps the woman with the dogs had returned, to find Mr Scanlon sleeping with the fishes. Giggling at the thought, he settled in for the short journey home.

Stepping out of the Lumière cinema into the hustle and bustle of St Martin's Lane, a somewhat dazed Carlyle rolled his head on his shoulders, trying to ease the gentle headache that was forming at the base of his skull.

Helen hoisted her outsized leather bag over her shoulder and took his arm. 'What did you think?'

Trying to push all thoughts of Béatrice Dalle from his mind, he gave her hand a squeeze.

'Not bad.' The young policeman was still coming to terms with European cinema, struggling to understand the difference between your basic porno on the one hand and 'art house' movies on the other. He was grateful for the fact that his girlfriend would happily take him to see one, while doubtless running a mile from the other; grateful but confused.

'Is that all you can say?' Helen teased. 'Not bad? Not exactly Barry Norman, are you?'

Mm. What do you want me to say? 'The sex scenes gave me a stiffy'? Avoiding any eye contact, Carlyle felt himself blush. This was tricky ground. He knew that he would have to take a strictly safety-first approach to the conversation if he wasn't to drop himself in it. 'It was good,' he said blandly. 'I enjoyed it. Very stim— er,

interesting.’ Not wishing to add anything more, he pulled her close and concentrated on slaloming through the evening crowds, leading her towards the Cafe Pasta fifty yards up the road.

Ten minutes later, they were sitting at a window table, sipping a cheap Pinot Grigio that had doubtless been sourced from the new Tesco supermarket around the corner and nibbling on large slabs of focaccia. Looking around, it occurred to Carlyle that the restaurant was still quite busy for the reasonably late hour. The pre-theatre crowd, a staple of the restaurants that lined this side of the street, had been and gone but the place was still at least half full. A couple of overworked waiters – a boy and a girl who barely looked out of their teens – flitted from table to table, taking the diners’ orders.

Helen gestured towards the handful of dough hovering in front of her boyfriend’s face. ‘Good?’

‘Mm.’ Struggling to make conversation, Carlyle took another bite of his starter and allowed himself to be distracted by a friendly-looking middle-aged couple at a nearby table. *Will that be us*, he wondered, *in twenty years’ time?* On first inspection, it didn’t seem such a bad prospect. The woman looked in good shape, at least for what he supposed to be her age; the man was clearly going to seed. Still, they seemed happy enough, engaged in thoughtful conversation, clearly relaxed in each other’s company.

‘So . . .’ Helen wiped the corner of her mouth with an oversized red paper napkin. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘Uh?’ Carlyle quickly returned his attention to his own table. ‘What do you mean?’

‘In terms of getting somewhere proper to live,’ she explained. ‘When are you finally going to move out of your parents’ flat?’

‘I dunno.’ Carlyle reached over and took another piece of garlic bread from the plate in the middle of the table. ‘When I can afford it, I suppose.’

Helen eyed him suspiciously. ‘Don’t you want to move out?’

‘Of course I do,’ he replied, immediately irritated by the sulkiness he could discern in his own voice. Taking a bite from the bread, he chewed carefully and swallowed. ‘But you know what it’s like, with the cost of renting. And then there’s the deposit and so on.’ So far, the closest he’d come to escaping his mother’s clutches had been a room in a place just off the Uxbridge Road. Unfortunately, it had never become available, thanks to the regrettable demise of the landlady, who had been brutally murdered before Carlyle had been able to express an interest.

‘Where will you go?’ Helen asked, trying to ignore his sloth.

Well, we could move in somewhere together, Carlyle thought wistfully. ‘Dunno,’ he repeated, suddenly reduced to adolescent monosyllables.

Helen looked at him carefully. ‘You know you should do it.’

‘Yeah,’ he agreed, trying to sound a bit more – what was the word? – *proactive*. ‘But these things happen. I’m trying my best.’

‘I know, sweetie.’

Whenever she used the word ‘sweetie’, Carlyle translated it as ‘pillock’. He tried not to wince.

‘You always try your best.’ Helen smiled, looking less than convinced.

Annoyed, he shoved the last of the bread into his mouth in an attempt to stop it saying something stupid. Looking across the room, he caught the eye of the waitress almost by accident. How much longer would they have to wait for their pizzas? The girl gave him a hassled smile that could have indicated anything from one minute to two hours and disappeared into the kitchen.

‘Anyway,’ he observed, through a mouthful of dough, ‘it’s not like you don’t still live at home, is it?’ Helen lived barely five minutes’ walk away from where they were now sitting. Her father had bought a small ex-council flat on the other side of Covent Garden, near Holborn tube station, when the Government started selling them off. Around the same time, her mother had upped and left, moving to Brighton not long after Helen had finished school. Not surprisingly, domestic arrangements chez Kennedy were a touchy subject. Apart from anything else,

an invite to visit the flat and break bread with Mr Kennedy had not been forthcoming; Carlyle didn't expect to be receiving one any time soon.

'That's different,' Helen replied, sitting back in her chair.

'How?'

'Well . . . ' By the time he caught the steely glare in Helen's eye, it was too late. The girl arrived with the pizzas and placed them carefully on the table. Sensing the darkening mood, she gave Helen a smile of sisterly support, while blanking Carlyle, who tried and failed not to stare at her bum as she turned round and scuttled off.

The meal continued in near silence. As Carlyle shovelled the food into his face in an efficient, joyless manner, the couple at the nearby table got up and left. Out on the street, the man put an arm round his wife's shoulders, planting a kiss on the top of her head as they headed towards Long Acre. Finishing his food, Carlyle somewhat reluctantly declined an ice cream, knocking back a single espresso as Helen paid the bill.

'I'll walk you home.'

'It's all right,' she said flatly, dropping her purse into her bag and pushing back her chair.

'No, seriously.'

'It's fine, John,' she snapped. 'I can make it through Covent Garden without any problem. I've been walking these streets on my own since I was eight, at least. I don't

need you to look after me.’

I know, he thought glumly.

Getting to her feet, Helen reached across the table and gave him the briefest of kisses on the lips. ‘I need to get an early night anyway.’

‘Okay,’ he said wearily, knowing that this particular skirmish was over and he had to resign himself to being on the losing side.

‘I’ll give you a call. Next time you choose the movie.’

He nodded, relieved that there had at least been a mention of next time. The young waiter appeared with Helen’s coat and gave her a smile that had Carlyle clenching his fists. Trying to calm down, he watched the boy open the door and wish her a good night. Helen thanked him and headed out into the street without looking back. Once she was out of sight, he grabbed his own coat and slipped out on to St Martin’s Lane, heading in the opposite direction.

Approaching the Strand, he passed the entrance to Charing Cross police station on Agar Street. On the steps of the front entrance, a pair of drunks mumbled at each other between swigs of Double Diamond from cans proclaiming *40% extra free inside*. Carlyle gazed up at the traditional blue lamp that stood over the doorway. He had never been inside the station, an impressive whitewashed building on the site of a former hospital. However, from what he had heard, it was a cut above the

places he had found himself working in during his fledgling career. *That would be a good posting, he mused, handy for popping in to see Helen, too.* Maybe one day. Sticking his hands in his pockets, he returned his gaze to the grubby pavement in front of his feet as he headed off towards his bus stop.

Nothing was more depressing than a two-day-old crime scene. With the victims taken away, the place was like a theatre production without any lead actors. The bit-part players who remained went about their tasks with a dogged professionalism, but the excitement of day one had gone, never to return. The drama of death had been replaced by the boredom of bureaucracy. The thrill was over.

Trying not to appear too much like a voyeur, Walter Callender eyed the smart but brittle-looking woman standing in front of him. Dressed in a tailored grey trouser suit and a pearl blouse, with a pair of sensible low-heeled patent-leather shoes, she looked – to the inspector’s way of thinking at least – more like a headmistress than a spy. He guessed she was about his own age, if rather better preserved. Despite her attempts to appear casual, he detected the impatient air of a woman used to having things proceed at a fair lick. Clearly, she must be more than competent to have reached the rank of commander in MI5. After all, the security services, like the police, didn’t tolerate women in senior positions unless they were at least twice as good as their male counterparts. But why was she here at all?

Not wanting to seem too curious about her presence, the inspector waited patiently as Camilla Brewster made a show of carefully inspecting Hugh Scanlon's study. For her part, the commander politely ignored the rather obvious attentions of her host as she perused the dead journalist's library.

After finishing with Fleet Street, Scanlon had done most of his writing in a small shed behind the house. It was the kind of simple wooden box with a pitched felt roof that you could buy at any garden centre for £80. According to the neighbours, the old fellow had spent the majority of his time either in the shed or by the side of the canal with his fishing rod. By all accounts the house itself was very much the domain of Mrs Scanlon, while her husband was allowed his small, semi-independent protectorate at the bottom of the garden. The space allowed him to get 'a bit of peace from his wife', as one of them, a small, nosy woman called Celia Woolfall, had put it. *That won't be a problem any more*, Callender had thought when he'd been told of the remark. *You'll get plenty of peace now*.

The shed was eight feet by ten, with floor-to-ceiling bookcases on two sides and a large window at the back looking out over the fields towards the canal. A wooden desk and a battered brown leather office chair took up most of the floor space, while a stainless-steel sink stood in the back corner, next to a small fridge. With Callender standing in front of the desk and Brewster behind it, the

place felt cramped and stuffy.

The commander had arrived from London that morning without any advance warning, a team of half a dozen forensics technicians in tow. Having taken over both crime scenes, Brewster's boys had already gone through the study, removing the papers that had covered Scanlon's desk, along with the contents of his waste bin and, bizarrely, his fridge. All that remained on the desk was a grubby red telephone, two cheap biros – one blue, one black – a dirty mug and a small plate. The plate was empty, apart from a few breadcrumbs and a blob of mustard. Feeling a sudden pang of hunger, Callender licked his lips. Lunch had been a ploughman's and a can of Coke that Joe Young had brought him from the Red Lion several hours ago. Both had disappeared into his stomach without touching the sides.

For the briefest moment, Callender imagined himself sitting in the shade of an oak tree in the pub's beer garden, sipping a pint of Young's Special London Ale. *Heaven.*

Quickly dismissing such a fantasy, he switched his thoughts to Mrs Callender's trip to Jones & Sons butcher's shop in Greaves Street. They had discussed it when he had finally got home the previous evening, and he knew that she would be cooking pork chops for tea. Glancing at his watch, the inspector vowed that he would not miss his dinner for the second night in a row. Absolutely not.

Returning to the matter in hand, he waited patiently

while the commander continued scanning the titles on Hugh Scanlon's bookshelves. Over the years, the journalist had collected a large but seemingly random mixture of largely non-fiction titles; thick hardbacks dominated the shelves, mainly twentieth-century history and current affairs, with a few biographies dotted here and there. A copy of *Rothman's Football Yearbook 1976*, on a middle shelf, stood out like a sore thumb.

'Do you think he read them all?'

'Sorry?'

Brewster pointed in the direction of a history of the Korean War. 'Do you think he read all these books? There are so many of them. How would anyone find the time?'

'I don't know.' Callender tried to add up all the books he himself had at home: a collection of Sven Hassel novels, a couple of old law texts and Mrs Callender's gardening books. Probably not even twenty; certainly fewer than Hugh Scanlon had written. To his left, at eye level, was a shelf dedicated to the man's own work. He had clearly been very prolific over the years; the inspector carefully counted no fewer than twenty-seven different titles bearing his name.

His musings were interrupted by Brewster mumbling something to herself. He watched as she picked a title from the shelf above her head, scanned the dust jacket for a few moments and then carefully returned the book to its place next to its neighbour. She repeated the process like a

picky reader in Newbury district library, unable to decide on her next selection.

What are you looking for? Callender wondered. *What have I missed here?* Under his shirt, he felt a bead of sweat run the length of his spine before disappearing between his buttocks. It had turned out to be another broiling day; even with the door open, the atmosphere in the hut was stifling. The commander, however, showed no signs of perspiring. Staring at his shoes, Callender tried to sniff out a trace of her scent. If she was wearing any, however, he couldn't detect it. Standing on tiptoes, she retrieved one of the more frivolous books from Scanlon's top shelf: *Norma Jean: The Life of Marilyn Monroe*. For fifteen or maybe twenty seconds she gave it the same careful consideration as she had all the others, before putting it back.

'Can I help you with anything in particular?' Callender asked politely as his reserves of patience ebbed away.

Turning to face the dull local policeman, she gave him a smile that could have been interpreted as either sad or ironic.

'Are you searching for something specific?' he persisted.

'No, not really.' Brewster gave him one last glimpse of the smile and then packed it away. 'I just find it interesting to get a feel for the man who lived and worked here, now that he's gone.'

Callender nodded solemnly. 'I was expecting CID,' he said finally. *Not the bloody security services.*

'I can imagine.' The smile made a fleeting reappearance. 'But we didn't think that would be necessary,' Brewster continued, making no effort to explain who she meant by *we*. She gave the inspector a look of such utterly shameless mock sincerity that he briefly had to look away. 'Your team is doing a professional and thorough job. I don't see any need to bring in outsiders at this stage, do you?'

What would you be, then? Callender wondered, feeling his hackles rise. It had taken him the best part of thirty minutes to get over his initial shock after she had first flashed some ID and asked to be shown the house and then Scanlon's den. The shock had since been replaced by a growing annoyance at her relentlessly patronising attitude and her refusal to explain what she was up to.

'As you can imagine,' the commander purred, laying on what charm she could muster for the benefit of the provincial plod, 'MI5 has followed Mr Scanlon's career very closely.'

'He was one of your spies?'

'No, no.' Brewster paused as a technician, one of the MI5 bods bussed in from London that morning, appeared in the doorway. 'Yes, Root?'

The technician, a small, tubby bloke with vague features, could have been anywhere from thirty to fifty. He

was dressed in white nylon overalls, which looked like they hadn't been washed in some considerable time. 'We're finished here,' he said quietly, wiping a bead of sweat from his brow with his sleeve, 'so we're off back to Gower Street.' Not waiting for a reply, he turned and headed towards the house.

Callender returned his gaze to the empty desk. 'What was Scanlon working on?' he asked. 'Was it relevant to his death?'

'There's no reason to suppose so,' Brewster said airily. 'What we are doing here, it's just standard protocol.'

'Of course,' said Callender stiffly, knowing bullshit when he heard it.

'Hugh Scanlon was a bona fide reporter,' the commander continued, 'a leading expert in his field. He served a number of Fleet Street's great proprietors with distinction for more than four decades. He would come into our offices and give talks to our people once in a while, give them a taste of developments in the wider world, but he wasn't on the payroll or anything like that.'

Anything like that?

'Personally, I thought he was interesting but a bit . . . obsessive.'

From the far side of the house came the sound of a van engine roaring into life and starting off down the lane; Brewster's crew heading back to London. 'You knew him?' the inspector asked.

‘We met maybe half a dozen times over the years,’ Brewster replied casually. ‘Either at one of his seminars or for a chat over a large tumbler of expensive single malt in the bar of the Athenaeum. Hugh liked his whisky, especially in more recent years. To be honest, I’m surprised that his liver was able to take it for so long.’

Callender knew when he was being pushed in a certain direction and he was happy to play along. If he was going to lock horns with this woman, it would have to be further down the line. ‘Well,’ he said, edging towards the door, ‘it looks like he’d had a skinful when he went into the canal.’

‘I’m not surprised, really.’

‘I’m still waiting for the pathologist’s report from Dr Scudder, but it looks like he had polished off something like half a bottle, maybe more, of Scotch. We would have probably considered it an accident if it wasn’t for what happened to the unfortunate *Mrs Scanlon*.’

Brewster folded her arms, waiting for him to go on.

‘So . . . it’s looking like he killed her and then took his own life.’ Having told her what she wanted to hear, the inspector allowed himself a rueful shake of the head. ‘It’s a sad business.’

‘Yes, it is,’ Brewster agreed. ‘And rather predictable. Hugh always did have his difficulties with women, and I believe his relationship with Marjorie was particularly tempestuous. Neither of them seemed to mellow very much

with age.’

Callender leaned against the frame of the door, the sun hot on the back of his shirt. ‘You seem to know a lot about their relationship.’

‘I’ve read the reports.’

The inspector frowned. ‘He was under surveillance?’

‘Not particularly.’

‘I see.’ Callender thought back to George Smiley and the Circus. Spy stories weren’t really his thing, but le Carré’s fictional characters seemed far more real than this woman standing in front of him. Somehow she appeared as little more than a two-dimensional cut-out character.

‘When will you get the report?’ Brewster asked, tiring of their small talk. ‘From your Dr . . .’ She tried to recall the name, but failed.

‘Scudder.’

‘Ah yes, from Dr Scudder.’

‘In the next day or so, I should imagine.’

The commander looked disappointed. ‘He takes his time,’ she said almost huffily.

‘He is very thorough,’ Callender explained, refusing to take offence on his colleague’s behalf. ‘And it’s not like we’re looking for anyone else, is it?’

Brewster held his gaze for several seconds. ‘No, not if you tell me that is the case.’

‘Good. We’ll let you have a copy of the report as soon as we get it ourselves.’

‘Thank you.’ The commander took one last look at Hugh Scanlon’s book collection and gestured towards the house. ‘I think we’ve done all that we can here, for now.’

Stepping out into the garden, Callender lifted his face to the sun as the commander strolled regally across the grass and disappeared around the side of the house. A few doors down, one of the neighbours, the Woolfall woman, was pretending to water her roses while taking stock of what was going on. The inspector looked at her blankly as he listened to the sound of Brewster’s chauffeur-driven Ford Granada heading back to the big city.

On the far wall, the tattered poster of Clyde Best had been replaced by a shiny new image of Tony Cottee celebrating a goal in front of a mass of happy supporters, torn from the pages of *Shoot* magazine. Underneath the latest hero of Upton Park, *Miami Vice* was playing silently on the TV, courtesy of the chunky Panasonic video cassette player squatting on the carpet nearby. Carlyle realised that he had seen the episode before but he couldn't remember the title or the ending. Reluctantly, he had to admit to himself that the show was beginning to get on his nerves. He had always been a big fan, but the gap between the fantasy and the reality of being a policeman was becoming too hard to bear. However long he worked in the Met, the young constable knew he would never gun down a major-league crime boss and enjoy the satisfaction of watching the criminal bleed out in a blizzard of cocaine. When you thought about it, life was fucking boring.

Sitting uncomfortably on Dominic Silver's new blood-red leather sofa, the disgruntled plod took a slurp from his cola. As Don Johnson socked another criminal in the mouth without creasing his shapeless pastel jacket, he let his attention drift towards the coffee table in front of him. Sitting on the glass top was a pile of papers about three

inches thick, next to another, unopened, can of Coke. Leaning forward, Carlyle realised he was looking at a selection of property details that had been collected from various estate agents scattered around west London. On top were the particulars for a three-bedroom penthouse flat with a small roof terrace just off the King's Road. The asking price made him wince.

After a few minutes, Dom appeared in the living room, pulling a *Rust Never Sleeps* T-shirt over his head while tunelessly mumbling the chorus of 'Welfare Mothers'. Trying to make himself more comfortable, Carlyle sat back on the sofa, pointing at the papers with his toe. 'That price. Is it a typo?'

Bending over, Dom peered at the six-figure number printed in large bold type next to the address. 'No, 'fraid not.'

'That's a fuck of a lot of money,' Carlyle observed.

'It is what it is,' his host grunted.

'You moving, then?'

'Thinking about it.' Picking up the Coke, Dom retreated from the table and flopped into the matching leather armchair in the corner of the room by the window. 'Not that place, though.' He grinned. 'It's in a nice enough neighbourhood, but I want something better.'

'Jesus, Dom.' A familiar mix of envy and irritation coursed through Carlyle's brain until his temples throbbed. As an officer of the law, he might look askance

at his mate's drug-dealing, but he couldn't help but lust after Dom's turbo-charged lifestyle; the boy was well on the way to meriting his own guest appearance on *Miami Vice*. 'How would you explain having the cash to pay for something like that?' he demanded.

'It's not a problem. As you might expect, I have people who sort that kind of thing out for me.' Dom popped the ring pull and chugged down half the can before letting out a modest burp. 'Anyway, that's all boring stuff. How's the little lady?'

'Fucking hell.' Carlyle giggled nervously. 'You can't call her that.'

'Why not?' Dom's grin grew wider as he glanced around the room. 'She's not here, is she?'

'No, but . . .'

'So she's never going to know, unless you let it slip.'

'I'm hardly likely to do that, am I? I'm not that stupid.'

Dom gave him a look suggesting that that was a matter of some continuing debate.

'I'm not,' Carlyle said huffily. Finishing his Coke, he placed the empty can on the table, pulled a copy of that morning's *Daily Mirror* from the back pocket of his jeans, unrolled it and began scanning the back page, which was given over to Scotland's inevitable elimination from the World Cup.

'You Jocks fucked up again,' Dom chuckled. 'Didn't ya?'

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Carlyle said wearily. ‘Let’s see how your lot get on.’

‘At least we’re still in it,’ Dom observed.

‘That’s only because you haven’t played anyone half decent yet.’

‘Fair point,’ Dom conceded. ‘But at least we’ve lasted longer than your boys.’

‘Okay, okay.’ Folding the paper in half, Carlyle tossed it on top of the estate agents’ particulars. ‘So, you’ve had a go at my girlfriend and my heritage. Is there anything else?’

Dom gave an innocent shrug. ‘Bit touchy today, aren’t you?’

No more than usual, Carlyle thought. ‘How would you like it if I had a dig at your bird?’

‘My *bird*?’ Dom chortled.

‘You know what I mean,’ Carlyle persisted. ‘How would you like it?’

‘I don’t have a girlfriend at the moment,’ Dom mused.

The realisation hit Carlyle that his own relationship status was currently in some doubt. He hadn’t seen Helen since the post-*Betty Blue* debacle. So far, he had called her three times without getting past her father. Waiting for her to return his calls was wearisome, and he tried to push it to the back of his mind. ‘Still,’ he mumbled, ‘you’d be pissed off.’

Dom thought about it for a moment. ‘Depends on what

she was like, I suppose. But I've got nothing against Helen; she seems like a very nice girl.'

I wouldn't call her that, either, Carlyle thought as he descended into a dark funk. Dom and Helen had met only the once; the idea of introducing his best mate to his girlfriend had caused considerably more angst than any meeting with his parents, and with good reason, as it turned out. He had arranged a quick drink at the De Hems Dutch bar, off Shaftesbury Avenue; it had not gone well. The two of them seemed to get on each other's nerves from the start; Dom started laying on his cheeky chappy charm with a trowel, while Helen became increasingly monosyllabic. The final straw came when a drunken punter came up to Dom and tried to buy some weed. After Carlyle explained what Dom actually did for a living, Helen simply picked up her bag and walked out.

'Why don't we do something next Saturday?'

'Huh?'

'We could all go out next Saturday night, have a few drinks and maybe grab a curry at Tandoori Nights.'

'The three of us?' Carlyle frowned. 'I wouldn't want you playing gooseberry.'

'Don't worry about that. I've got someone I can bring along.'

Carlyle looked at him suspiciously. 'I thought you didn't have a girlfriend.'

'That doesn't mean I can't rustle up someone to take to

dinner.'

'An escort?'

'No, no, no.'

'Helen would go mad.' *Even assuming I can get her to come in the first place.*

'No. Nice girl. Eva Hollander. I've seen her a few times . . . nothing serious.'

Carlyle was briefly distracted as the episode of *Miami Vice* came to an end. With the criminals safely behind bars, the credits rolled before the video clicked off and began rewinding itself. Ignoring the asthmatic noise coming from the VCR, Carlyle asked: 'Does this poor girl know what you do for a living?'

'Sure,' Dom said evenly. 'Her husband is a customer of mine.'

'Her husband?' Carlyle spluttered. 'What the fuck?'

'He's a total shit.' Dom gazed at the window. 'I feel a bit sorry for her really. Hopefully she'll leave the dickhead and stop wasting her time trying to get him clean.'

You could always stop selling to him, Carlyle reflected. 'So you want her to dump him and run straight to you,' he quipped.

'Nah.' Dom shook his head. 'I think she'll go travelling. She graduated from university last year; needs to put that loser behind her and see a bit of the world. It'll do her good.'

A vision of the double date from hell flashed through Carlyle's mind. 'She's not a customer as well, is she?'

'Not really. Well, maybe just the occasional toot. She's far too smart to be using regularly.'

I've heard that before, Carlyle thought sourly.

'Speaking of which . . .' Leaning back in his chair, Dom reached into the front pocket of his jeans and pulled out a clear grip-seal plastic bag containing an off-white powder. 'Want some whizz? This is good stuff.'

'Yeah?'

'*Yeah.*' Dom's eyes gleamed with mischief.

Carlyle thought about it for a moment. 'Go on, then.'

'Good lad. Half a gram?'

'Maybe just a quarter.'

'The customer is always right,' said Dom with a flourish, tossing the bag to Carlyle, who caught it in his left hand and slipped it into his jacket pocket.

'Pay you next week?'

'Sure.' Dom gestured towards a pile of glossy magazines sitting on the floor next to the coffee table. 'Help yourself to a couple more mags if you want. Last month's *Playboy* is quite good. There's an interesting article in there about . . . something or other.'

Carlyle leaned forward, then hesitated. A vision of his mother swooping into his bedroom to confiscate his porn stash made him wince. 'Nah,' he replied. 'It's okay. Thanks, though.'

‘You know what, Johnny boy?’ Dom chuckled. ‘You need to get out of there.’

‘Tell me about it,’ Carlyle groaned.

‘I don’t know how you put up with your mother.’

‘Neither do I.’

‘You can crash in the spare room for a while if you like. You could have the place to yourself when I move.’

Carlyle shook his head. He could never afford Dom’s flat, and even if he could, there were other considerations. Helen would never allow it, for a start. And his employers would be less than impressed as well. ‘I’m sorting something out. It’ll be fine.’ Suddenly energised, he jumped to his feet. ‘I’ll be getting somewhere soon.’

Still mulling over his conversation with the spook, Walter Callender wandered into the kitchen with a Spar plastic bag that he had retrieved from his car. From the bag he took a tin of tuna and a pint of full-fat milk, along with a cheap metal tin-opener. Finding a couple of bowls in a cupboard over the sink, he poured a third of the milk into one and placed it on the floor. ‘Hey, cat. Where are you?’

One of the neighbours had told him that the cat was called Tebbit, after the politician. That would explain the animal’s anti-social attitude, he thought sourly. Cutting open the tin, he dumped the tuna into the second bowl and placed it next to the milk. ‘Tebbit. Dinner time!’

After a couple of moments there was the sound of gentle mewling from somewhere behind the cooker. The inspector touched the bowl of food with the toe of his brogue. ‘It’s good stuff. I eat it myself.’

There was another small yelp, but the cat showed no sign of coming out. Callender checked his watch. Mrs Callender would be getting his tea ready. ‘Come on,’ he pleaded. ‘I haven’t got all night.’

Grabbing a fork from the cutlery drawer, he dropped to one knee, speared a fat chunk of tuna and waved it towards the gap between the cooker and an avocado-green

fridge freezer that hummed noisily in the corner of the room. Instead of the cat, however, he was confronted by something else: a strip of torn grey cotton peeking out from under the side of the fridge. In the gloom, it took the inspector a moment to understand precisely what he was looking at. ‘Damn,’ he mumbled to himself, ‘how did we manage to miss those?’

Struggling to his feet, Callender dropped the fork in the sink and began searching for a plastic bag. ‘More to the point, how did Brewster’s people manage to miss them?’ He shook his head. ‘Bloody smart alects.’

By the time he got round to calling Frank Scudder, Tebbit had demolished the tuna. and was agitating for a second bowl of milk. Shooing the cat away, the inspector waited patiently for his colleague to come to the phone.

‘What can I do for you, Inspector?’ the pathologist asked cheerily. ‘I would have thought you’d have been off home by now.’

God, Callender thought wearily, *everyone’s got me pegged as a total time-server. That’s what happens when you leave London for the sticks, I suppose.* ‘Sorry to call you so late,’ he said. ‘I was just wondering how the autopsies were going.’

‘I haven’t started yet,’ said Scudder. ‘There was a smash on the ring road last night. Some teenager sent a Capri into the back of a lorry. Caused a five-mile tailback. Three dead, six injured. Your two got pushed back down

the waiting list, sorry.’

Typical. ‘Okay, fair enough. Just one quick question.’

‘For you, Inspector, anything.’

‘Mrs Scanlon. Was she wearing knickers?’

‘Didn’t you check?’ Scudder chuckled. Not waiting for a reply, he continued: ‘Since you ask, no, she wasn’t. Moreover, in anticipation of your next question, from a preliminary investigation conducted before Boy Racer and his mates muscled their way on to my slab, it looks like she was sexually assaulted.’

‘By her husband?’

‘I would doubt it. According to his medical records, Hugh Scanlon had been struggling with impotence for more than a decade. Not such a big surprise when you think about it, given his age.’

‘Okay. When will you get round to them?’

‘Tomorrow at the earliest. More likely the day after. I’ll keep you posted.’

‘Thanks.’ Ending the call, Callender wandered back into the kitchen to retrieve the Marks & Spencer plastic bag into which he had placed the newly discovered evidence. Locking up the house, he slowly made his way to the car, conscious of the lace curtains twitching in next door’s front room. The sun had disappeared behind the clouds and the temperature had fallen by maybe ten degrees, leaving a discernible chill in the air. Worse than that, it looked like he would be late for dinner again.

Settling into the driver's seat, the inspector knew what he had to do next. He had a lot of time for Frank Scudder and was sympathetic to the difficulty of doing his job with the limited resources provided by Berkshire County Council. If he was going to solve this case, however, Callender knew that he was going to have to call on additional help.

It was impossible to ignore the flowers. Thirteen, no, fourteen roses, red, yellow and orange – a riot of colour in the otherwise monochrome office. From a secret admirer, perhaps?

Catching her underling staring at the bouquet, the commander gave him a sharp look. 'They brighten the place up a little, don't you think?'

'Er, yes, I suppose so,' stammered Palmer, blushing slightly, worried that the old bag might be able to read his mind. These little chats in her office were becoming an unfortunate habit, and he wondered what she had in store for him this time. One thing was certain: she wasn't in the slightest bit interested in his opinion of the flowers.

Picking up a small card from her desk, Brewster smiled. If anything, it made her look scarier than usual. 'They were a very nice surprise when I arrived in the office this morning.'

'I'm sure.' A thought popped into Palmer's otherwise empty brain. *Security probably shoved them through the*

X-ray machine in the basement. He smiled at the idea. The petals would probably drop off in a matter of hours. ‘Who were they from?’ he asked hopefully. Any scuttlebutt about the commander would be gold dust. After more than a year in Gower Street, Camilla Brewster was still an enigma to her colleagues. Forty-something. Divorced. Rumoured to be dating a still-in-the-closet junior minister in the seemingly impregnable Thatcher government. Not a lot to go on, really. The nearest they’d come to any colour was when Marchmain had tried to start a rumour that she liked it doggie-style; no evidence had ever been forthcoming and Palmer had always thought that his chum’s dirty mouth and loose tongue had played a not insignificant part in his subsequent deployment to the Falkland Islands.

Ignoring the question, Brewster carefully returned the card to the table. When she looked again at Palmer, the smile was gone. ‘I went out to the countryside,’ she said grimly, ‘to see your latest handiwork for myself.’

‘Oh yes?’ Palmer had known this was coming, but still it sent a shiver through his bowels.

‘Scanlon was handled . . . satisfactorily.’

‘Thank you,’ he said, bracing himself for the *but*.

‘But Mrs Scanlon . . .’ Brewster said grimly. ‘What the hell did you think you were doing? You had no authority in that regard.’

‘The old girl started cutting up rough,’ the agent said,

staring off into space as if trying to recall the details. ‘I had to take some action.’

A look of profound disgust swept across the commander’s face. ‘And the . . . assault?’

‘I had to make it look realistic.’ Palmer shrugged, crossing his legs to cover the quivering erection in his trousers.

‘You had no authority,’ Brewster repeated flatly.

‘I knew that if I didn’t take appropriate action, there was the likelihood that the operation would have been compromised.’

Appropriate action? Brewster shuddered. Was the boy some kind of psychopath? She realised that she should have sent him to the Falklands when she’d had the chance. Now she was stuck with him. Unbidden, a quote from Shakespeare popped into her head:

I am in blood

Stepp’d in so far that, should I wade no more,

Returning were as tedious as go o’er

‘So you tried to make it look like she’d hanged herself?’ The commander shook her head in disbelief.

‘It was enough to create some doubt in the minds of the local plod,’ Palmer continued, confident in his ability to brazen it out. ‘It’ll give us more time to, er, sort things out.’

‘Give *me* more time, you mean,’ Brewster barked, furious at herself for allowing this young whippersnapper to turn the tables on her so easily. ‘Time to clean up your mess.’ She stared at the flowers, but even that small pleasure seemed to have been ripped away from her. ‘If I’m not careful, Palmer, you are going to send me the way of my predecessor.’

‘How is Commander Sorensen?’ Palmer asked solicitously.

‘Struggling, apparently. His wife has refused to relocate to Port Stanley and the poor fellow is hitting the bottle quite hard, by all accounts.’

‘Mm.’ Palmer had heard as much on the grapevine. Marchmain said they were running a book on how long it would take their boss to end up face down in the South Atlantic. Anyway, back to the matter in hand. ‘Do you need me to do anything about the Scanlon situation?’

‘No, no.’ Brewster dismissed the suggestion with an angry wave of her hand. ‘You’ve done enough already.’

‘So, everything is . . . sorted?’

‘Yes. My people . . . our people have gone over the scene and cleaned it up. CID has been told to keep its nose out. The local constabulary will remain nominally in charge. Happily these people couldn’t catch a cold. But I will keep an eye on it, just in case. I consider it my penance for letting you loose on those poor people in the first place.’

Ignoring the barb, Palmer spread his hands wide. ‘So what can I help you with today, ma’am?’

Brewster shuddered, then quickly pulled herself together. Taking a slim manila envelope from a drawer, she pushed it across the desk. ‘Now that Scanlon has been dealt with, we need to move up the food chain.’

‘Yes.’ Palmer stared at the envelope but made no effort to pick it up.

‘So, how much do you know about a gentleman called Maurice Peters?’

‘Oi, Carlyle!’

‘Yes, Sarge?’ Having just reported for duty, the young constable eyed the desk sergeant warily, wondering what rubbish job he was going to be awarded today. Alec Jeffreys’ complexion was getting redder by the day. It looked like the half-bottle of Metaxa brandy that he routinely kept under the desk had already taken quite a hammering this morning. Not for the first time, Carlyle thought wistfully of Jeffreys’ predecessor, the voluptuous Sandra Wollard, a forty-something divorcee who had set tongues wagging at the station by ravishing a willing Carlyle at a crime scene. Soon afterwards, she had decamped to the delights of Theydon Bois. Since then, her young paramour had hooked up with Helen, but Sandra still held an unshakeable place in his affections.

Jeffreys gestured towards an older guy standing a couple of feet from the desk. He was slender, maybe a shade over six feet tall; Carlyle pegged him at mid to late fifties. His suspiciously black hair was slicked back across his scalp with Brylcreem, and despite the relatively early hour, there was a dark five o’clock shadow on his jaw. Dressed in a tweed suit with a checked shirt and a red tie, he looked like a character out of a 1950s B movie.

It's a bit hot for that get-up, was all Carlyle could think.

The ensemble was completed by a pair of heavy-looking tan brogues. A small canvas holdall sat on the floor next to the desk.

'This is Inspector Callender,' Jeffreys explained. 'He needs to go to the Castle.'

'And you want me to take him?' Carlyle's voice held all the enthusiasm of a ten-year-old facing a plate of Brussels sprouts.

'No,' Jeffreys replied sarkily, 'I want you to give him directions.'

Callender offered Carlyle an apologetic shrug. 'To be honest, Sergeant, I don't need a minder.'

'Protocol,' Jeffreys replied, moderating his tone only slightly for the benefit of his superior. 'No one goes into the Castle on their own until further notice. It's not safe.'

'I've been in far worse places.' The inspector smiled, trying to keep things light.

Jeffreys, however, was not going to be moved on the issue. 'If I let you go in there and you get your head kicked in by a bunch of yobbos, I'll be the one who gets it in the neck.' He licked his lips; Carlyle sensed he was gagging for a drink.

In the face of the thirsty jobsworth, Callender conceded gracefully. 'Fair enough,' he said. 'I'm not here to cause you grief, Sergeant.'

‘Thank you, sir.’ Jeffreys shot Carlyle a look and pointed towards the station entrance with his biro. ‘There’s a car waiting downstairs. Just make sure you get in and out without any mishaps. And watch out for the dog shit.’

Ha, bloody, ha. Carlyle involuntarily lifted a hand to his face. The bruises had faded but the mental scars remained.

‘Dog shit?’ Callender enquired.

‘The silly sod went arse over tit while chasing a suspect,’ the sergeant explained gleefully.

‘We caught the bugger, though, didn’t we?’ Carlyle felt compelled to pipe up in his own defence. Roger and Gareth Lovelock had been picked up in a New Cross drinking den the previous night. Their mother was still in hospital; it had been confirmed that she would never walk again.

‘Yes,’ Jeffreys reflected, ‘we did. And after you let him slip through your grasp, it only took us an extra thirty officers and another seven grand of overtime.’

‘Shit happens,’ Carlyle mumbled.

Tiring of the banter, Callender picked up his bag and gestured towards the door. ‘Shall we get going?’

The traffic was so bad that it made the Elephant and Castle seem like rush hour in Lagos. Sitting in the front of the police Escort, Carlyle lifted his gaze from the registration

plate of the lorry in front and eyed the inspector in the rear-view mirror. ‘What are we doing in the Castle, then?’

‘We’re going to see a woman called Claire Marshall,’ Callender said evenly, not making eye contact. ‘Whitelaw Walkway, number 47b. Do you know it?’

‘We’ll find it. Why do you want to talk to her?’

‘Her parents have been murdered.’

‘Oh, I see.’ Carlyle went back to staring out of the window while Callender gave him a quick overview of what had happened. A middle-aged woman pushing a shopping trolley made an ambitious attempt to use a zebra crossing and almost lost her groceries as a taxi lurched across her path. The woman jumped back on to the pavement, cursing the driver, who studiously ignored her as his cab came to a complete standstill, half on the crossing. *The traffic just keeps getting worse and worse*, reflected Carlyle. *One day the whole place is going to seize up altogether.* He tuned back in to what the man behind him was saying. ‘I don’t remember reading about that in the papers.’

‘You didn’t,’ Callender harrumphed. ‘They slapped a D-notice on it.’

Carlyle frowned. A D-notice was a government ‘request’ to news editors not to report a story for reasons of national security. ‘Why?’

‘That,’ Callender smiled, ‘is a very good question.’

By the time they reached their destination, the residents of the Castle were only just beginning to stir, and they made their way to Whitelaw Walkway, deep in the heart of the estate, without incident. Claire Marshall was a tall blonde of indeterminate age, who looked like she was still trying to perfect the appearance of a surly teenager. With a cigarette hanging from her bottom lip, she ushered them into the flat without comment. At first glance, the only thing of note in the living room was the half-empty bottle of Cossack vodka sitting on the coffee table, next to a pair of empty glasses. Marshall indicated for them to take a seat on the faux leather and grabbed the bottle, unscrewing the cap with a smooth, practised movement and dumping a large measure of the spirit into one of the glasses.

Not so much a triple measure, Carlyle thought, impressed and horrified in equal measure. More like a quadruple.

Taking a slug of her drink, Marshall stepped over to the fireplace, which was empty apart from a small three-bar electric fire, and leant against the mantelpiece. ‘You’ve got a bloody nerve coming here,’ she hissed.

‘You’re the daughter of Hugh Scanlon?’ Callender enquired, ignoring her opening gambit.

The woman nodded from behind her glass.

‘In that case,’ the inspector continued, ‘I’m sorry to have to inform you that your parents have been killed.’ Carlyle was surprised at the flat, emotionless tone of his

delivery; presumably it came from decades of giving people bad news. He realised that this would be his job one day, and shuddered.

Marshall took a long drag on her fag and blew a stream of smoke past a framed print of a naked couple in a passionate embrace. It was a cheap reproduction and there were what appeared to be dart holes in various places. 'Good,' she said finally, not looking at either of the guests sitting on her sofa.

The two policemen exchanged a quizzical glance.

Marshall watched her cigarette burn down to the filter and let it drop into the fireplace. 'My mother died fifteen years ago,' she continued. 'She walked in front of a Piccadilly Line train near Osterley.' She glared at Carlyle. 'Have you ever been to Osterley?'

Staring into his lap, Carlyle was forced to admit that he had not.

'Bit of a boring place to die,' Marshall said drily. 'Anyway, it was a while ago. Presumably you're referring, technically, to my stepmother?'

'Our apologies,' Callender conceded, in a tone that suggested he took such bureaucratic cock-ups in his stride. 'I was referring to Mrs Marjorie Scanlon.'

'Marjorie was his third wife,' Marshall explained, keeping the matter-of-fact tone going. 'My mother was number two.'

'I see.' Callender nodded. 'Still, we're sorry for your

loss.'

Carlyle raised an eyebrow. *Sorry for your loss? What are we these days, the bloody Samaritans? You'd never get anything as poncey as that from Jack Regan.*

Marshall muttered something under her breath that sounded to Carlyle very much like *no great loss*, before sticking a rictus grin on her face. 'Thank you for letting me know, Inspector.'

'You are taking it very calmly,' Callender observed.

'He'd had a good innings and she . . . well, she wasn't my mother. Both of them drank too much and he lived in that fantasy world of his, full of traitors and spies and so on. He was like a little kid who'd made a living out of playing cops and robbers.' She shot them an unapologetic look. 'Sorry, but you know what I mean.'

Callender nodded. Carlyle just stared at the painting, unable to work out what the inspector was hoping to get out of the visit.

'I don't know how my mother put up with it for so long,' Marshall continued. 'And then he ditched her, after almost twenty years. She never got over it, the silly cow.' Draining her glass, she contemplated the bottle on the table for a long moment before deciding to resist the temptation for now. Carlyle watched as Callender pulled a small business card from his jacket pocket and, leaning forward, placed it next to the bottle.

'That's the details for the local funeral director.

Apparently your father had already made all the necessary arrangements.’

‘I’m sure,’ was her only reply.

Pushing himself up from the sofa, Callender got to his feet and gestured for Carlyle to do the same. ‘Well then,’ he said solemnly, ‘we need to be going. Once again, let me express our condolences.’ When Marshall, gazing aimlessly out of the window, did not respond, he added: ‘We’ll see ourselves out.’

Carlyle was relieved to find Whitelaw Walkway clear of any hostiles. Ushering the inspector towards the stairs, a thought suddenly struck him. ‘She didn’t ask anything about what happened. You would have thought she would have wanted to know how they died, her dad at least.’

‘You get all sorts of reactions, lad,’ Callender replied sagely, ‘when you give people news like that.’ He patted the constable on the shoulder.

Carlyle stopped and looked up at his colleague. ‘Do you think she’s in shock?’

‘I think she’s pissed,’ said Callender, moving round him and skipping down the stairs. ‘And after everything that’s happened in that family, she probably couldn’t care less.’

Back at the entrance to the estate, Carlyle was even more relieved to find the police Escort waiting for them still in one piece, its driver unmolested. Clearly the locals were off their game today. As they reached the car, he turned to

Callender and smiled. ‘Sorry it was a wasted trip.’

The inspector scratched his head, careful not to leave a single slicked-back hair out of place. ‘I wouldn’t say that,’ he smiled.

‘But what did you get out of Claire Marshall? Nothing, as far as I could see.’ Now that he thought about it, he couldn’t even remember the inspector asking the woman any substantive questions.

‘I didn’t come here to see her,’ Callender explained, reaching for the door handle.

‘Oh?’

‘No, not really.’ Callender stood on the kerb, carefully looking Carlyle up and down as if unable to make his mind up about something. ‘Can you keep your mouth shut?’

‘Yes,’ said Carlyle a tad too eagerly. ‘Of course I can.’ It was one of the few things he knew he *could* do.

Callender pondered it for a moment longer. ‘Okay,’ he said finally. ‘Let’s go and see someone who will be a lot more useful than Claire bloody Marshall.’

Martin Palmer reached the bottom of the page and blinked. Unable to focus on the text in front of him, he blinked again. With some dismay, he realised that he couldn't remember a single word he'd just read. Maybe it was an imbalance in his brain, a lack of a particular protein or something, another consequence, no doubt, of his mother's attempt to place him on a starvation diet. Clearly it was having a terrible effect on his short-term memory. Then again, words had never been one of his strong points. They brought back memories of school. Unhappy memories.

Pushing thoughts of 4B from his mind, he closed the file and pushed it across his desk. Leaning back in his chair, he laced his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling. It needed a coat of paint. Just like the rest of the place. As far as anyone knew, the last time the department had enjoyed a decoration budget it was managed by Kim Philby. *Explains the drab, Soviet-style decor*, Palmer reflected drily.

Philby, one of the most infamous traitors of all time, had been the subject of not one but *three* books by Hugh Scanlon. There had been another two about the Cambridge Five, the spy ring of which he was a leading member. Compared to them, who was Maurice Peters? Little more

than a complete nobody. It was arguable whether the man was even a traitor at all. But a senior ex-service operative writing his memoirs was a clear breach of the Official Secrets Act. The *Daily Mail* had described it as a ‘truly shocking threat to national security that could put the lives of untold agents in the field at risk’.

That’s the problem with people these days, Palmer mused, they simply have no respect for anything, whether it be signed contracts or national security. Always bleating about the so-called ‘public interest’ in order to justify their shallow and venal behaviour. It was all just too much.

Peters, feeling cheated over his pension, had pocketed a six-figure advance from an American publisher and signed Hugh Scanlon as his ghostwriter. With the book due to be published abroad, beyond the reach of the British courts, the powers-that-be had decided that more drastic action was required. That was where Palmer came in.

He had no idea whether Peters’ memoirs contained anything of any interest to anyone. Of course, the newspapers speculated about the ‘explosive revelations’ contained therein, but then they would, wouldn’t they? The draft manuscript that Brewster had retrieved from Scanlon’s study was safely behind lock and key in her office. Palmer wouldn’t be reading it even if he wanted to, which he didn’t. All he was concerned about was finishing the job.

After a rather rushed lunch in the Brideshead Café, close to the office, he took a short cab ride to the Pitchfork Club, down by the river in Millbank, in search of his quarry. When he arrived, the press conference called by Peters' agent had just broken up. Waiting for the throng in the Cromwell Room to disperse, Palmer manoeuvred his way behind Peters, who was holding court in front of a gaggle of journalists. They were waiting, pens poised over ring-bound notebooks, for a final juicy quote.

'I have no doubt,' Peters opined, unaware of the new arrival, 'that Hugh Scanlon was murdered by the security services. They're trying to shut me up.' It was the first time that Palmer had seen the man in person. His initial impression was of an eccentric-looking bloke with wild blue eyes and a shock of unruly white hair, who still retained an imposing physical presence despite being in his late sixties. His shabby suit looked like it had been slept in, and Palmer was reminded of nothing so much as a tramp from one of the *Just William* books he vaguely remembered from his childhood.

The journalists finally dribbled away. Palmer waited until they had the room to themselves, then stepped in front of the old man, hand extended. 'Mr Peters . . .'

Taking a half-step backwards, the retired spook shoved his hands in his pockets, his busy eyebrows knitting together in disgust. 'Who are you?'

'The name's Palmer,' came the cheery reply. 'I'm from

‘I know where you’re from, sonny,’ Peters said sharply, edging further away. ‘I can spot one of you from a mile away.’

Palmer stepped forward, conscious that they appeared to be practising dance steps together. *Keep smiling*, he told himself, wishing that he could finish off the old bugger on the spot. ‘Don’t you mean one of *us*?’

Flaring his nostrils, Peters looked like he was about to spit on the carpet. He thought better of it and jabbed an angry index finger towards his latest foe. ‘We’ve got nothing in common,’ he hissed, ‘so why don’t you just run along?’ He tried to push past the younger man, but Palmer moved into his path.

‘I think you need to come with me,’ he said quietly, trying to inject a little menace into his voice, opening his jacket to give the old-timer a clear sight of his side arm.

Peters’ reaction to the glimpse of the gun, however, was only to smile. Palmer felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to face a giant of a man, easily six foot three and built like the proverbial brick outhouse. He glowered at Palmer. ‘Everything all right, Maurice?’

‘This is Kelvin McKillick,’ Peters explained with relish. ‘He’s a producer at ITN. Ex-SAS. He’s very interested in me as a story. So unless you want him to break your neck, or worse, stick a camera in your face, I suggest that you bugger off.’

Palmer hesitated.

‘Of course,’ Peters continued, his eyes twinkling with mischief, ‘if you *were* to suffer a broken neck, it would be a terrible accident, just like Hugh Scanlon.’

Feeling the hand on his shoulder tighten, Palmer reluctantly turned towards the door.

‘You know what was completely unprofessional?’ Peters said behind him.

Sod off, you old bastard, Palmer seethed.

‘The wife,’ the old man continued. ‘That was totally unnecessary and deeply suspicious. If you had been working for me, I would have had you sacked on the spot.’

Feeling his face going red with embarrassment, Palmer restricted his response to a grunt as he kept walking.

‘Mark my words,’ Peters cooed cheerily as he disappeared through the door, ‘that will bring you down, sooner or later.’

After more than ten minutes stalking through the Wolfson Building, they finally found Laboratory 6. On the door of Room 415 was taped a printed sign that said *PROFESSOR PAUL LAMB*. Below that had been added in red biro: *Please knock and wait to be invited to enter.* Ignoring the instruction, Callender pushed open the door and disappeared inside without breaking his stride. By the time Carlyle followed him through, he was engaging in a hearty handshake with a middle-aged man in a white lab

coat. The professor was a rather unprepossessing fellow; about five foot eight, with a small paunch, tired blue eyes and a most unfortunate comb-over that did nothing to hide his bald pate.

‘Sorry to burst in on you like this, Paul,’ said Callender, taking a half-step backwards to reveal Carlyle hovering in the background. ‘This is one of my colleagues, John Carlyle.’

All the young constable got from the scientist was a facsimile of a smile and the briefest of nods. ‘No, no, not at all,’ he responded, immediately turning his attention back to the older man, ‘but didn’t I hear somewhere that you’d retired?’

‘Not quite,’ Callender explained, his tone more than a little apologetic. ‘We moved to Berkshire. Mrs C had fancied it for some time,’ he added, sensing that some kind of explanation was necessary.

Poor sod, Carlyle thought.

‘My commiserations.’ The scientist chuckled. ‘How long did it take you to realise that you were bored?’

Callender smiled sadly. ‘About two weeks.’

‘Ah yes,’ the professor mused, ‘the things we do for the sake of domestic harmony. Anyway, what brings you to Imperial College?’

From his holdall Callender retrieved a clear plastic evidence bag about the size of an LP cover. Inside was what appeared to Carlyle to be a pair of knickers. ‘I was

wondering if you would look at something for me.’

Taking the bag, Lamb held it up to the light above their heads. ‘Messy.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Callender. ‘There should be plenty of genetic material on there for you to find.’

‘Okay, I’ll see what I can do.’ Lamb tossed the bag on to a nearby workbench. ‘Give me a couple of days, okay?’

‘That would be great. Thanks.’

‘Do I have something to compare it to?’

‘Not yet.’ Callender grinned sheepishly. ‘Soon.’

Lamb nodded. ‘Is this official?’

The inspector’s grin grew wider. ‘Not yet. Soon.’

‘All right, all right.’ The professor shook his head, as if he was dealing with a troublesome but likeable student. ‘I suppose it is better if I don’t know. Come back in a couple of days. In the meantime’ – he gestured towards a pile of files on the bench – ‘I’ve got work to do. Forgive me if I don’t offer you a cup of tea.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Callender, winking at Carlyle. ‘I think we’ll head off for a glass of something stronger. It’s been a long day.’

‘Fair enough. The Union Bar is just across the road. It has some good guest ales at the moment. Cheap, too.’

‘Sounds perfect.’ Callender gestured for Carlyle to lead the way. ‘See you the day after tomorrow.’

They arrived at the bar to find it packed. There were one or two funny looks, but no one said anything about his uniform. Carlyle gestured towards a small TV screen hanging from the ceiling in the far corner of the room. It commanded the rapt attention of about ninety per cent of the almost exclusively male clientele. 'I'd forgotten about the football,' he groaned. 'England are playing Argentina.' From what he could make out, the game was still scoreless.

'Maradona will stuff 'em,' Callender muttered under his breath as he pushed past a couple of dishevelled-looking students to reach the bar. 'Hopefully.' Catching the eye of the girl behind the bar, he ordered a whisky. 'What d'ya fancy?'

Carlyle glanced at his watch. 'Technically, I'm still on duty.'

'Pfff.' The inspector scowled.

'Okay, I'll have a lager.'

'Good man.'

Edging backwards into the drinkers behind him, Callender carved out a niche for them. To Carlyle's left, a pair of middle-aged academics were discussing the various shortcomings of their respective students; it

appeared that they were the only people in the bar who were uninterested in the World Cup. Checking over his shoulder that he had a reasonable view of the screen, Carlyle began to make himself comfortable.

A roar went round the room as the teams came out. ‘Don’t you think Lineker could cause them some problems?’ Carlyle asked as he took a sip of his pint. The lager – a brand he’d never heard of – had a nasty chemical taste, but it was cold and slipped down easily.

‘Nah.’ Callender shook his head. ‘The English never get any further than this. They’re worse bottlers than us.’

‘You Scottish, then?’

‘Yup. You?’

‘My parents are from Glasgow,’ Carlyle explained, ‘but I was born down here.’

‘Carlyle,’ Callender grunted. ‘Good Scots name.’ Downing his drink, he ordered another round, waving away Carlyle’s protests that it was his turn with a brusque *I know how much a constable gets paid*. ‘Born in Dunoon,’ he added.

Carlyle looked at him blankly.

‘South of Holy Loch, on the Firth of Clyde.’

‘Okay.’ Carlyle nodded, still not quite placing it; geography had never been one of his strong points.

Callender handed over a couple of pounds and waited for his change. ‘Came to London in ’57. Left the year before last.’

‘And you miss it? London, I mean?’

‘Aye, son.’ Callender clapped him on the shoulder. ‘Take my advice, stay where you are.’

‘Don’t worry about that.’ Carlyle grinned. ‘I’m not going anywhere.’ He took another sip of his pint and gazed at the condensation on the glass of the second one, already lined up on the bar in front of him. There was no way he was going to keep up with the inspector. Another roar indicated that the game was now under way. Happy to have the distraction, he turned to give it his full attention.

After a nondescript first half, the only surprise was that England were still in the game. To Carlyle’s relief, Callender had switched to drinking Coke. He himself had barely made a start on his second pint, which was now lukewarm, making it somewhat less than appealing. ‘So,’ he asked, elbowing a guy in a David Bowie *Let’s Dance* T-shirt who was trying to push his way to the bar, ‘who’s the professor?’

‘Paul?’ Callender stifled a burp. ‘He’s one of the guys who discovered the genetic fingerprint.’ Seeing the lack of understanding on the constable’s face, he added, ‘DNA.’

Out of the corner of his eye, Carlyle could see the teams coming out for the second half. A murmur of anticipation went round the pub; someone gave a halfhearted cry of ‘Inger-land!’ before being laughed down by his mates. ‘What’s that?’ he asked, not really interested.

‘He helped me with my last case before I left the Met.’

‘Uh-huh.’ The second half kicked off, and immediately, the tension levels around them soared.

‘I’d read about the work he had been doing and went to see him about the murder of a fourteen-year-old boy, Dean Monkton.’ Callender leant towards Carlyle and raised his voice, in order to make himself heard over the rising noise. ‘His battered body was found in a derelict house off the Mile End Road. He had been sodomised and his head bashed in with a hammer. One of his mates, Eric Day, confessed, but it had been beaten out of him and we had no corroborative evidence. Professor Lamb was able to compare Day’s blood with samples from the crime scene. Everyone has their own genetic fingerprint, or DNA. You can get it from things like hair or saliva . . . or blood. Paul Lamb was the first person in this country to be able to identify it. In this case, according to his DNA fingerprint, Eric Day didn’t do it.’

‘So who did?’ Carlyle asked, both eyes now firmly on the TV.

‘We still don’t know—’

The inspector was interrupted by a massive groan from the assembled crowd as Argentina finally scored. The complaints reached a crescendo as the goal was replayed from multiple angles, each one conclusively showing that Diego Maradona – who else? – had punched the ball into the net with his hand.

‘Cheating Argie bastard!’ someone shouted.

‘How the hell did he get away with that?’ Carlyle asked, genuinely shocked. ‘The ref must be blind. And what was the bloody linesman doing?’

‘Told you.’ Callender grinned, patting him on the shoulder. ‘C’mon, let’s get going.’

Carlyle reluctantly pushed his way through the crowd, following the inspector to the door. They had barely made it on to the street when another collective groan followed them out.

‘Two nil,’ said Carlyle, a deep-fried Scottish *Schadenfreude* rising in his Anglo bosom.

‘That’s the end of that, then,’ observed Callender, making his way briskly towards the car.

With half the population of the city glued to the TV, the roads were uncharacteristically empty. Having taken a direct route through Hyde Park, the Escort pulled up in front of Paddington station just as the match ended and England’s elimination was confirmed. *Ha*, thought Carlyle gracelessly, sitting in the back seat, *suck on that, Dominic Silver, you West Ham-supporting ponce!* With a shake of his head and a muttered curse, the driver switched off the radio and glanced at the inspector in the rear-view mirror. ‘This all right, sir?’

‘Perfect, thank you.’ Pushing the door open, Callender slid out, talking to Carlyle over his shoulder as he did so.

‘Come with me for a minute, would you?’

Like the roads, the main concourse inside the station was quiet. The inspector glanced up at the departures board and grunted. ‘Platform six in three minutes. Sod it, I’m not running for that, I’ll get the next one.’ He turned to face Carlyle. ‘Pick me up when I come back, will you? I’ll have a word with your sergeant and let him know the precise time.’

‘Sure,’ said Carlyle, happy enough to oblige. Hanging around Imperial College was infinitely preferable to foot-patrol duty around the Castle.

‘And remember, you have to keep your mouth shut about all of this.’

‘Of course.’ Carlyle watched a pair of drunken football fans stagger on to the concourse. They seemed depressed rather than angry, which was just as well. In the provinces there would be mini riots tonight in response to the outrage of the cheating Argies; London, on the other hand, would move seamlessly on to other distractions. ‘But why are you having to do this on the QT?’

‘Good bloody question.’ Callender scratched his chin. ‘It’s a funny carry-on. A double murder in a county where they’re lucky – or unlucky – to get two murders a decade, and CID don’t get a look in but MI5 are all over it.’

‘MI5?’ Carlyle asked. ‘Why would they be interested?’

‘You tell me,’ Callender harrumphed. ‘Bloody spooks, they’re a right shower.’

Carlyle said nothing. He had a vague sense of lots of pieces of information floating around in his brain, waiting to come together to form a coherent whole. He couldn't force the process; it would happen in its own time. Or maybe not. 'So, this DN . . . whatnot . . .'

'DNA,' Callender reminded him.

'This DNA malarkey is going to help you solve it?'

'Maybe. Professor Lamb has to find some genetic material on the wife's knickers and then I have to find a match. There are no guarantees, but if I do that, bingo.'

Carlyle watched a Bristol train pull in to Platform 3. 'It sounds too good to be true,' he reflected. 'More like science fiction.'

'This is the future,' Callender replied, with more than a hint of missionary zeal in his voice. 'Genetic testing will radically change policing for your generation. In twenty or thirty years' time, the police will have access to massive databases that will allow them to cross-check samples from any crime scene in the country. For the criminals, there will be nowhere to hide.'

Dream on, thought Carlyle. The inspector seemed a top bloke, but his faith in technology appeared to the jaundiced constable to be rather misplaced. Even if genetic testing was as good as he claimed it was, the Met would find ways of fucking it up.

Sensing his young colleague's scepticism, Callender ended the sermon and glanced back at the departure board.

‘My next train’s in fifteen minutes. I think I’ll go and grab a *Standard* and a coffee and then jump on. Thanks for all your help today. I’ll let you know when I’m coming back.’

Back on Praed Street, it took Carlyle a moment to realise that the Escort had gone. *The bloody cheek!* Cursing the driver, he watched two drunks in replica football shirts pissing in the doorway of a boarded-up shop on the other side of the road. Five yards away, a group of passengers waiting for the 35 bus looked on in disgust. One of them, a middle-aged woman, caught sight of Carlyle in his uniform and gestured for him to do something. Not wishing to be called into action on such an unpleasant matter, he promptly turned away and strode off in the direction of Lancaster Gate.

Still sulking after his run-in with the irascible Maurice Peters, Palmer was in no hurry to return to Gower Street to be given another dressing-down by the commander. He exited the tube at Piccadilly Circus and headed into Soho. Walking up Windmill Street, the thought struck him that while there might currently be no vacancies in Port Stanley, there were plenty of other undesirable postings around the globe. Brewster could be arranging a one-way ticket for him to anywhere, from Kinshasa to Ulan Bator. Shuddering at the thought, he ducked into the foyer of the Duchess of Cornwall cinema and bought a 50p ticket for a showing of *Harold and Maude* and a jumbo box of Maltesers. The Duchess was a down-at-heel building that had alternated in its eighty-year existence between being a theatre and a strip club. Since the early 1970s, the place had been owned by Raymond Gordon, the self-styled king of 'Soho smut'. He had turned it into a porno cinema, showing a loop of X-rated movies to a select clientele of men in grubby macs. By the mid-eighties, however, the video industry was taking a large chunk of the blue-movie market and the Duchess was trying to diversify to appeal to an arthouse crowd, with special showings of cult classics such as Hal Ashby's 1971 romantic comedy

featuring a young man and a seventy-nine-year-old woman.

Sadly for the cinema's management, nothing could be done about the clear odour of ejaculate that hung over the auditorium, deterring even the hardiest cinephile from countenancing a return visit. Taking his seat in the back row as the opening credits rolled, Palmer was not surprised to find that he had the place to himself. 'Oh well,' he mumbled, crunching through the honeycomb centre of one of his chocolates, 'I suppose having my own cinema makes the experience all the more decadent.' This was hardly the first time he'd bunked off work for a bit of much-needed light relief, and he settled in, trying to put the exasperations of work behind him, at least for a little while.

Ruth Gordon had been Palmer's earliest crush. Seeing her in *Rosemary's Baby* had given him his first erection, but it was only after watching *Harold and Maude* at boarding school that he realised he had a particular interest in much older women. Since then, he must have seen the film – 'the greatest love story of all time' – at least twenty times.

Ten minutes in, he was still the only person in the cinema. Throwing the last of the Maltesers into his maw, he munched happily as he unzipped his trousers and began rummaging around in his Y-fronts. From experience, he knew how to get the most out of the movie and wanted to pace himself.

‘Hey, mister!’

‘Ugh . . .’

‘Mister!’

Palmer dragged his eyes from the movie to be confronted by a small Asian-looking woman pointing a torch at his crotch. Following the feeble beam, he looked down at his glistening erection. ‘Yes?’

‘You no do that here,’ said the woman, in a tone so matter-of-fact it left him feeling offended.

‘Don’t be silly,’ he spluttered, allowing one eye to return to the screen. ‘This is the Duchess, for God’s sake. You get a packet of tissues with your ticket.’

The woman frowned. The deep lines on her forehead made her look a hundred years old, almost too old even for Palmer.

‘Well you should do.’

‘Do yourself up,’ she demanded, gesturing with the torch.

‘Bugger off,’ hissed Palmer, feeling his member quiver in the face of this unexpected altercation. Gripping it gently with his fingers, he began massaging the tip. ‘I’ve paid for my ticket,’ he said huffily.

‘It’s illegal!’ the woman screeched. ‘I’ll call the police.’

‘Go away.’ Palmer gestured with his free hand. ‘I want to enjoy the rest of my film.’

Leaving the cinema as the closing credits rolled, Palmer placed his used tissues in the empty Maltesers box, closed the lid and smugly placed his rubbish in the bin next to the cigarette vending machine in the foyer. He considered himself a fastidious man; it was one thing to make a mess, quite another to expect anyone else to clean up after him, at least when it came to bodily fluids. Even at home, he was careful to spare his mother from having to deal with his waste.

The next feature of the afternoon was *Klute*. He vaguely remembered having seen it, but Jane Fonda was not one of his favourites; she was too young for his tastes and a pinko to boot! A young couple were buying their tickets from the bored-looking girl sitting in the kiosk. Palmer shuddered. What was the bloke thinking? Even he wouldn't bring anyone here on a date. Hovering by the concession counter, he was contemplating treating himself to more chocolate when he caught sight of the usherette who had objected to his antics in the theatre. She was glaring at him. As he turned to give her a winning smile, she lifted a bony finger.

'That's him. The dirty boy!' she hissed.

Glad you liked the show, Granny, Palmer smiled. Only then did he notice the two police officers – a constable and a WPC – hovering behind the woman, under a poster advertising a midnight showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. His grin evaporated as his eyes flitted

between the pair of giant red lips on the poster and the two police officers. *You two would fit right in*, he thought glumly, *as a passable Brad Majors and Janet Weiss*.

Taking a deep breath, he threw his shoulders back in an attempt to look like a vaguely respectable citizen. ‘Officers . . .’

The pair eyed him grimly.

‘I think you’re going to have to come with me, sir,’ the male officer said, in the robotic manner of plods the world over. Palmer sighed. Pawing the filthy carpet, he saw the couple at the ticket booth turn to take in the pre-show entertainment. The girl, he realised, was really quite pretty, her looks highlighted by the plainness of her companion. *She’s out of your league*, he thought cheerily as he caught the guy’s eye.

‘Sir?’ the WPC echoed.

Palmer tried to look surprised and innocent at the same time. ‘But why?’

Clearing his throat, the PC actually blushed. *Bless*. ‘I think you know,’ he said, trying to sound commanding.

‘I’m sure I don’t,’ Palmer responded sweetly, patting his jacket pocket. He didn’t want to do the *Do you know who I am?* routine. But if it came to it, he could dazzle them with his MI5 identity card.

‘He was the only one in there,’ the usherette squawked. ‘Pumping away as if his life depended upon it.’

The woman standing in front of the ticket booth failed to

stifle a giggle.

‘Now look here—’ Palmer started to protest, but before he could work up a head of righteous indignation, he found himself face down on the carpet, with the WPC’s knee in his back.

‘I think we’ll sort this out down at the station,’ she grunted, pulling his arms behind his back and slipping on a pair of handcuffs. ‘If that’s all right with you, *sir*.’

Palmer started to mutter something about police brutality, but all he got for his trouble was a mouthful of carpet. Sensing that they had seen the best of the foyer drama, the couple headed off into the cinema. A strange giddiness descended upon the young spy, as if he’d reached some kind of personal nadir . . . and survived! *You’d better behave yourself in there*, he thought as he watched the pair disappear into the darkness. *Look at what’s happened to me. And they say it’s supposed to be a free country!*

Hauled to his feet, Palmer was pushed unceremoniously towards the door. Out on the street, it had started to drizzle. Even in the handcuffs he attracted little attention from passers-by – this was Soho, after all – as he was roughly bundled into the back of a police Mini. The whole event had an unreal quality to it, like he was watching another movie. As the car slowly made its way on to Shaftesbury Avenue and round Piccadilly Circus, he tried to focus on his predicament. How had things come to this?

Sometimes he wondered if he might lack willpower or impulse control. Despite everything, he felt a frisson of excitement at getting caught. Where were they taking him? Savile Row, probably. He would sort it out when he arrived; a quiet word with the desk sergeant and his liberty would be restored, allowing him to return to . . .

It took Palmer a moment to remember what he had been up to before the debacle at the Duchess. His run-in with Maurice Peters now seemed to belong to the dim and distant past. After his dressing-down by the old fool, he should have gone straight back to Gower Street. Gower Street! *Oh dear*, he thought, stifling a titter. *Brewster is not going to be happy with me, not in the slightest.*

DNA testing is like the hand of God on the shoulder of the criminal.

‘More tea?’

‘Huh?’ Carlyle looked over the top of the magazine at his mother, who was waving an outsized teapot in his direction.

‘I was going to make another cuppa for your dad. Do you want one?’

‘I’m fine, thanks.’

Lorna pointed at the magazine with the spout of the pot. ‘New . . .’

‘*New Scientist*,’ he snapped, annoyed by the interruption. ‘It’s, a, er, science magazine.’

‘Oh, I see.’ His mother retrieved a chipped mug from the draining board and half filled it with Tetley’s finest blend. ‘When did you start reading that?’ Placing the pot by the sink, she took a bottle of gold top from the fridge and added a splash of milk to the mug.

‘I picked it up at the library,’ Carlyle mumbled, retreating back behind the pages of the mag. ‘It’s interesting.’

‘Mm. Better than looking at girlie pictures, I suppose.’

‘Ma!’

Lorna slipped past her son, heading for the door. ‘You had a phone call earlier.’

This time Carlyle gave her his full attention. ‘Helen?’ he asked hopefully. Communication with his girlfriend had not been restored since the mini row at Cafe Pasta, and he was growing increasingly despondent. He wouldn’t put it past her to dump him without even mentioning it. The thought made him feel sick.

‘No,’ his mother replied, disappearing into the hallway. ‘Dominic.’

‘Ah.’ Tossing the magazine on to the table, he jumped to his feet and followed her into the living room.

‘I had a word with Mister Silver about those dirty magazines,’ his mother quipped as she handed her husband his drink. Alexander Carlyle was sitting in his favourite armchair, talking to himself as he watched the TV news.

‘Bloody woman!’ With his free hand the auld fella retrieved a foam brick from down the side of the chair and threw it at the set. Carlyle watched in amusement as it bounced off the screen and landed at his feet.

‘Maggie winding you up again, Dad?’ He gestured at the familiar image of Mrs Thatcher hectoring someone about something.

‘Drives me round the bend.’

‘Hush, you sad old man,’ Lorna scolded. His mother, ever the contrarian, was the only Conservative in the household. As far as Carlyle was aware, she was the only

Scottish Conservative in the known universe.

‘Well . . .’ Alexander took a loud slurp of tea and retreated behind his mug.

‘I would have thought you’d have got used to her by now,’ Carlyle observed.

‘Never,’ the old man hissed.

‘Well, I’d stop watching the news,’ his son advised. ‘She’s gonna be around for ever at this rate.’

‘No one lasts for ever, son,’ Alexander countered.

Carlyle gestured towards the screen. ‘I dunno about Mrs T. I wouldn’t put it past her.’

‘All political careers end in failure, thank God!’ His father took another mouthful of tea. ‘I just wish she’d bloody hurry up about it.’

Their doleful banter was disrupted by the chirruping sound of the phone ringing in the hallway. *Helen?* Carlyle sprang towards the door. ‘That’ll be Dominic,’ his mother explained. ‘He said he’d ring back.’

‘You don’t seem too happy to hear from me.’

Carlyle closed the door to the living room, in the hope that it would impede his mother’s eavesdropping. ‘I was expecting someone else,’ he admitted.

Dom chuckled. ‘She still hasn’t rung?’

‘Nope.’

‘Time to take the bull by the horns, Johnny boy.’

What the fuck does that mean? Carlyle thought sourly.

‘Show her who’s boss.’

We know who’s boss. ‘Did you want something?’

‘Only to do you a favour, sunshine.’

‘What?’ Carlyle grunted. ‘With your quality relationship advice?’

‘In *addition* to my quality relationship advice.’

‘Lucky me.’

‘You sarcastic little scrote,’ his mate chided. ‘Now listen. Remember Martin Palmer, that perv that worked for the secret service?’

‘Of course,’ Carlyle responded, his mood only worsening at the mention of the MI5 man.

‘The one you fancied for killing those little old ladies.’

‘I remember.’

‘The one you failed to nick?’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Carlyle through gritted teeth. ‘Alright. I hadn’t forgotten him.’

‘Well,’ Dom burred, ‘I think you might just have got lucky. He was nicked last night.’

Carlyle frowned. ‘How do you know?’

‘My uncle was working the desk in Savile Row when they brought him in.’ Despite his detour into the drugs trade, Dom was still well plugged into the Met grapevine through an extensive network of family and friends who worked on the force. ‘He had to help process the dirty bugger.’

‘For murder?’ Carlyle asked hopefully.

‘Nah. He was caught wanking off in the Duchess cinema.’

‘Urgh.’

‘I know.’ Dom laughed. ‘When he got to the station, he started shouting about how he worked for MI5, as if that was relevant to a spot of self-abuse in a Soho establishment. Unhappily for him, Uncle Kev wasn’t standing for any nonsense and threw him in one of the cells. They conveniently forgot to give him his phone call, so he’s still there now. I can get you twenty minutes alone with him. Maybe you can get him to talk.’

‘Hardly.’ *The hand of God* . . . An idea started forming in Carlyle’s head. ‘Do they have any evidence?’

‘A woman working at the cinema caught him in the act, apparently.’

‘No, no. Do they have any *physical* evidence?’

‘No idea,’ Dom groaned. ‘I don’t think so. Why?’

‘Can you check with your uncle?’ Carlyle demanded, ignoring the question.

‘Call him yourself. Frankly, I don’t want to know. He should be back on duty in an hour or so.’

‘Okay, thanks. Speak later.’ Ending the call, Carlyle skipped back into the kitchen to consult his magazine.

Rose Hu pulled herself up to her full five feet two inches and glared at the young policeman. ‘I’ve been working here for twenty years,’ she complained, her accent almost

as strong as when she'd first arrived in London from Hong Kong back in 1961, 'and it's always the same. Men. Dirty fucking bastards!'

'I know.' Carlyle glanced around self-consciously. His shift started in an hour and he was in uniform. An early showing of *Kelly's Heroes* had just come to an end and the audience, a random collection of students and other wasters, were dribbling out into the foyer, giving him dirty looks as they headed for the street.

Rose waved a finger in his face. 'I always have to clean up after. The smell is terrible. And the mess!' One of the students caught Carlyle's eye and grinned.

Fuck off, you little sod, the constable thought, *or I'll nick you too.*

'Is he going to jail?'

'I hope so.' Carlyle returned his attention to the wizened woman. 'What I'm wondering is, if, um . . .'

'Yes?' Folding her arms, she waited for him to spit it out.

'If you might have the . . . *materials* that the gentleman left behind.'

'Materials?' Rose frowned so hard, it looked like her face was imploding in slow motion. 'What you mean?'

'His rubbish,' Carlyle corrected himself. A quick call with Sergeant Kevin Silver, Dom's uncle, had confirmed that nothing had been collected from the scene at the time of Martin Palmer's arrest. Once Palmer's lawyer had

finally been contacted, the onanist had been released from police custody. He was due to reappear at Savile Row in a fortnight's time. By then a decision would have been made about whether to prosecute. Essentially, it was a case of Palmer's word against that of Rose. Uncle Kev hadn't said as much, but it was odds on that the case would be dropped. 'I was wondering, what happened to his rubbish?'

'You wanna see the bins?' Rose shook her head in disbelief.

'Er, yes, I suppose so.'

'Okay, come with me.' Turning, she headed towards a small door next to the concession stand. 'But watch out for the rats. They're mean devils.'

Fresh off the 11.36, Callender walked down the platform, flashed his pass at the ticket collector and acknowledged the waiting constable with a brisk nod. 'Got the car?'

'It's outside,' Carlyle responded. 'And I've got something else for you too.' Unable to control his excitement, he held up a plastic evidence bag to show the inspector his booty – a discarded Maltesers box containing a selection of crumpled tissues. 'From a suspect.' He knew that he was taking a complete punt, but if this DNA-business was as clever as Callender seemed to think it was, it was a punt worth taking.

Callender looked at the bag and marched on without

breaking his stride, heading towards the station exit.

‘I think it might give you a match to the stuff on Mrs Scanlon’s—’

‘Not here,’ Callender grunted, upping the pace. Carlyle hurried after him, somewhat disgruntled that his efforts had not been recognised. It had taken him the best part of two hours’ rummaging around the Duchess’s bins to find what Rose thought was Martin Palmer’s rubbish. Late for work and smelling like a tip, he’d rung the station and thrown a sickie before taking his evidence home. Of course, he had no idea whether it would be of any use or not, but at least he had tried.

Sitting in the back of the Escort, Callender listened to Carlyle’s story in silence. As the car pulled up outside the Wolfson Building, he finally spoke.

‘So you think this Palmer chap has killed before?’

‘Yes.’ Carlyle nodded, happy now that he’d at least had a decent hearing.

The inspector gestured at the bag sitting on the seat between them. ‘And you’ve got his DNA in there?’

‘I hope so,’ he replied diffidently. ‘You can get it from, er, ejaculate, can’t you?’

Callender sighed deeply. ‘Come on,’ he said, opening the door. ‘Let’s go and see what Paul has to say.’

The morning rush hour had been and gone, leaving the Brideshead Café empty, save for a solitary patron. Sitting in the back booth, Martin Palmer speared a couple of chips and sighed. Lifting the fork in front of his nose, he studied the food, making no effort to open his mouth. The unthinkable had happened: he had lost his appetite. Next to his plate, the front-page headline of that morning's *Daily Mail* simply read: *CATCH ME IF YOU CAN!* Underneath a large photo of a grinning Maurice Peters, the story recounted how the rogue agent had fled to Australia to avoid the clutches of an 'MI5 death squad'. Inside, the story ran across [pages 4](#), [5](#), [9](#) and [13](#). There was even an editorial devoted to the 'shocking incompetence' of the security services in the face of the nest of vipers in their midst. No cliché had been left unused as the paper worked itself into a blue funk about the threat to national security and 'Britain's role as a force for good in the world'.

Letting the fork fall back on to the plate, Palmer grimaced. When even the *Mail* was this hostile, the game was surely up. The newspaper, however, was the least of his worries. After interminable delays, he had managed to escape from Savile Row police station, but there was still a charge of indecent exposure and lewd behaviour hanging

over him. The way things were shaping up, even a posting to Port Stanley was looking vaguely desirable. Maybe he could try and work something out with his Falklands-based colleagues Marchmain or Flyte; he had absolutely no doubt that either one of them would bite his hand off if he offered them the possibility of an accelerated passage back to civilisation.

He looked at his cooling breakfast and a ripple of nausea passed through his gullet. At the very least he had aimed to present himself in front of the commander fortified, with a full stomach, but even that seemed a forlorn hope. Pushing away the plate, he took a sip of tea, wondering how much longer he could postpone the inevitable carpeting.

‘There you are.’ Before he could look up, Brewster slipped into the seat opposite and placed her purse on the table. A waitress appeared to take her order and was immediately sent scuttling back behind the counter by an imperious glare. ‘How long have you been hiding in here?’

‘Well . . .’ Palmer tried to inject the slightest hint of insouciance into his voice, but he was immediately distracted by movement behind the commander. Unable to focus on his boss, he looked past her shoulder to see a man in a tweed jacket making his way towards them with a police constable in tow. The plod was smirking like a teenager who’d just got laid; he looked vaguely familiar,

but there was nothing particularly surprising about that – all those young boys in uniform looked the same. The man in the tweed jacket stopped behind Brewster.

‘Martin Palmer?’

‘That’s me,’ the spook conceded.

‘Inspector Callender.’ The man flashed a warrant card by way of confirmation. ‘I need you to come with me, please.’

A look of shock passed across the commander’s face. Keeping her gaze fixed on the wall, she made no effort to turn towards the new arrival.

‘Now look here,’ Palmer protested. ‘If it’s about the most unfortunate misunderstanding at the Duchess cinema . . .’

‘Martin Palmer,’ Callender intoned, with all the solemnity of a hanging judge, ‘you are under arrest on suspicion of murder.’

‘Murder?’ Palmer squeaked. He tried to appeal to Brewster, but she had turned to stone. Out of the corner of his eye, he was conscious of the waitress edging round the counter to get a better view of the drama.

Callender signalled to the uniformed officer for a pair of handcuffs. The plod, who seemed to be enjoying the show immensely, obliged immediately.

‘That won’t be necessary,’ Palmer protested.

‘Protocol.’ The inspector waited for Palmer to struggle to his feet, then snapped on the cuffs. ‘After you, sir,’ he

said, gesturing towards the door.

As Palmer walked slowly towards his fate, Brewster finally spoke. ‘I’ll have a bacon sandwich,’ she instructed the waitress, ‘and a pot of Earl Grey tea.’

The basement restaurant was packed with a happy, slightly inebriated crowd. The staff at the Tandoori Nights flitted from table to table, handing out menus, taking orders and delivering plates of food and trays of drinks to hungry customers. Every so often a table would be vacated by one group, only for it to be immediately claimed by another. Later, once the pubs shut, the clientele would take a turn for the worse, but for now, it was largely just couples wanting to enjoy their Saturday night.

Finishing his lager, Dominic Silver waved the empty pint pot in the air, signalling to a passing waiter that he would like another of the same. Without breaking his stride, the waiter collected the glass and headed towards the tiny bar at the end of the room. ‘Poor bloke,’ said Dom, stifling a burp as he watched the waiter refill his glass from a large bottle. ‘What a shocker!’

‘I know,’ Carlyle mumbled from behind his own glass. ‘But the worst thing about it is that it could have been me.’

‘I suppose.’ Dom shrugged, apparently not too bothered at the thought. Picking up an onion bhaji from his plate, he dropped it into his mouth and began chewing as the waiter reappeared with his drink. Relieving him of the glass, Dom swallowed before offering a toast. ‘To Dudley!’

‘To Dudley.’ Carlyle thought of the hapless PC Stockbridge, stuck in an intensive care bed in St George’s, and wondered if their good wishes would make him feel any better. Around the time that he had been enjoying the arrest of Martin Palmer, someone had lobbed a brick off Whitelaw Walkway, right on to Dudley’s bonce. Carlyle would have been standing next time to him at the time had he not been seconded to Walter Callender; it was another reason for him to thank the inspector. And he had Paul Lamb to thank as well. Together, the three of them had nicked a killer. Carlyle had been amazed when the professor was able to get a match from Palmer’s genetic material. It still sounded like the stuff of science fiction to him, but maybe this DNA thing would catch on after all.

‘The Castle always was a rough old spot,’ Dom observed. ‘They’re all bloody animals in there.’

Carlyle nodded sagely. ‘Yes indeed.’

‘Do you think he’ll come back?’ Dom tipped back his head and let half the pint slide down his throat.

‘Dunno.’ Carlyle broke off a piece of poppadom and nibbled it thoughtfully. ‘I wouldn’t if I was him. Not after a fractured skull. You’d have thought the Federation would be able to get him a good deal, maybe even early retirement.’

‘At twenty-four?’

‘Why not? There’s the emotional trauma, as well as the physical damage.’

‘You’ve clearly given it a bit of thought,’ said Dom, taking another mouthful of beer.

‘Well,’ Carlyle reflected, ‘if you’re not fit for duty, you’re not fit for duty.’

From the other side of the table, Helen glared at him over the top of her glass of Merlot. ‘Are you going to talk shop all night?’

Eva Hollander placed a hand on Helen’s shoulder. ‘I know what you mean,’ she giggled, her sparkling eyes locked on Dom. ‘He’s just the same. And he doesn’t even work there any more.’

Carlyle looked at Dom, and they both laughed.

‘So what are you two talking about?’ Dom retorted.

Eva took a sip of her gin and tonic. ‘Just . . . stuff.’

Carlyle held Helen’s gaze, and her smile caused a flowering of hope to bloom in his chest. Taking another swig of his lager, he felt almost giddy with happiness. Helen had finally relented and called him; they had survived another bump in the road. Indeed, he liked to think that he had almost detected a hint of contrition when she had agreed to go on a double date with Dom and his ‘non-girlfriend’. Now that they were here, the two women were getting pissed . . . and getting on like a house on fire.

‘Coppers,’ Helen laughed. ‘Who’d have ‘em?’

***The Hand of God* playlist**

1. Everybody Wants to Rule the World – Tears For Fears
2. Money For Nothing – Dire Straits
3. Take On Me – A-Ha
4. Miami Vice Theme – Jan Hammer
5. The Boys of Summer – Don Henley
6. Glory Days – Bruce Springsteen
7. Walking on Sunshine – Katrina and the Waves
8. Sugar Walls – Sheena Easton
9. Addicted to Love – Robert Palmer
10. West End Girls – Pet Shop Boys
11. Alive and Kicking – Simple Minds
12. Kiss – Prince
13. Higher Love – Steve Winwood
14. Sledgehammer – Peter Gabriel
15. Manic Monday – The Bangles
16. The Sweetest Taboo – Sade
17. Living in America – James Brown
18. Walk This Way – Run-DMC
19. Sweet Love – Anita Baker
20. Spies Like Us – Paul McCartney

Table of Contents

[Title](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[12](#)

[13](#)

[14](#)

[15](#)

[16](#)